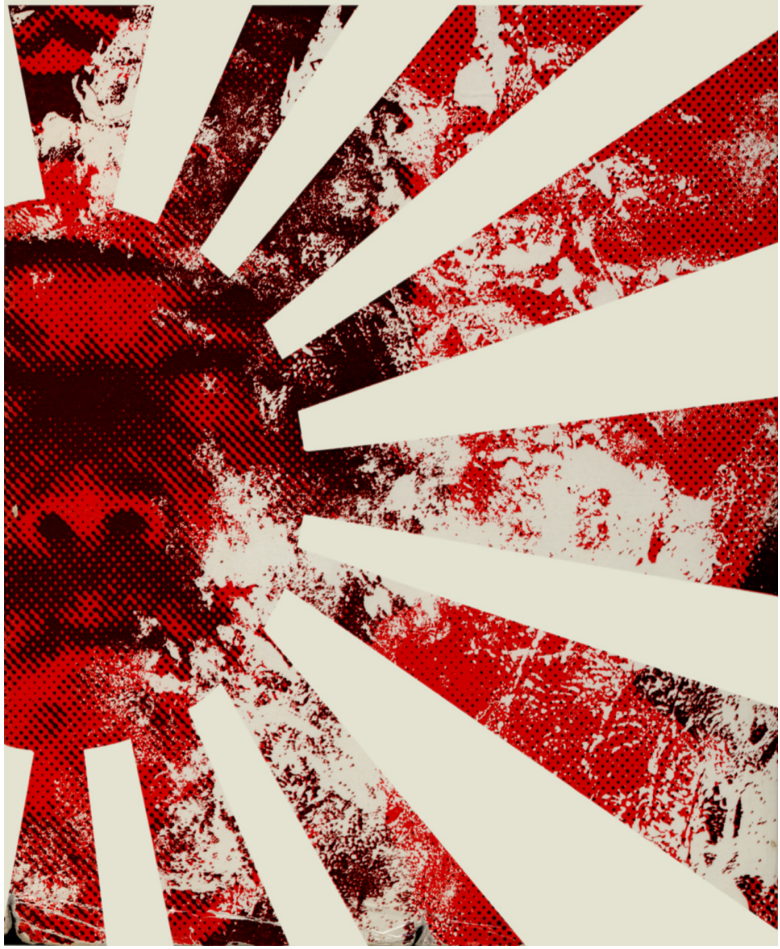
KENNETH HARRISON

THE BRAVE JAPANESE



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and registered in Australia for transmission by post as a book.

For the men of the Eighth Australian Division
and my late cousin, Walter James Hegarty,
who also would have been a soldier but for
the eyes his Master gave him.

FOREWORD

The Brave Japanese was first published in 1966. It chronicles my father's experiences during the Second World War as an anti-tank gunner in Malaysia, a Prisoner of the Japanese and as one of the first allied soldiers to enter Hiroshima immediately after the atomic bombing of 1945.

I was only six years old when this book was originally published. My only clear recollection from that period was reading a two page spread in the *Melbourne Sun* covering the controversy surrounding the book's title. For many returned servicemen—especially those who had also been prisoners of war —to describe the Japanese as "brave" was seen as almost treasonous.

Dad died in 1982, shortly before the book was republished as *The Road to Hiroshima*. At that time, nuclear disarmament was a highly passionate topic and the publishers felt that the Hiroshima angle would capture more interest than the then fading interest in Japanese prisoners of war. I suspect that they also sought to avoid the controversy engendered by the books original title.

In deciding on the title for this digital re-print, my sister and I both agreed that the original title was most appropriate. Dad's Hiroshima recollections have definite historical significance and to this day I can barely believe that my own father walked through a nuclear devastated city. But for us, his enduring legacy was his tolerance, optimism and humour that had somehow survived—or perhaps even was forged—in the horrific experiences he experienced as a young man. His controversial decision to describe his former enemies as brave exemplifies that attitude.

Our father witnessed and experienced some of the most extreme suffering visited upon human beings by other human beings—both in the Japanese Camps and in the aftermath of the first atomic holocaust. That he retained his faith in humanity after these experiences is inspiring. My sister Gabrielle and I are honoured to have had the opportunity to preserve this autobiography.

Guy Harrison

Melbourne, December 2009

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Action in Malaya

CHAPTER ONE

WE WERE IN a gay mood that very early day of September, 1945, as we approached Hiroshima. As usual, the Japanese civilians in the train were remarkably friendly once their early awe of our "military police" armbands disappeared, and we had gladly shared their simple breakfast of cold rice and pickled daikon.

Before long everybody in the carriage was smiling at the nonsense of Puteh and Khaw Kok Teen, who were trying out their charm and knowledge of the Japanese language on two girls who had dissolved into helpless giggles behind their fans. I exchanged a smile with Alan Foo and then glanced idly out of the window.... At first I could not believe my eyes. Was it imagination, or were the houses here really built with a slight slant almost like the tower of Pisa?

But then we saw more leaning houses, and more, and the closer we came to Hiroshima, the greater became the angle, until the bamboo walls were bent back as though they had been carelessly pushed by some giant hand.

The next lot of houses lay flat, and then there were no houses—only ashes. Thus we came to the quiet city of Hiroshima.

The train pulled in to a completely bare platform—all that was left of the outermost of three railway stations serving Hiroshima—and we climbed down, and stared about us incredulously. Hiroshima was a silent wasteland of desolation and ashes.

From our platform we could see that the uprooted railway line made a wide sweep around the city, and so complete was the devastation, that the low, bare platforms of the other two railway stations were clearly visible in the distance.

The outlines of the streets stood out in geometric squares as precisely as though they had been drawn on paper. Here and there a tower, or the shell of a concrete building still stood, but

the rest of Hiroshima was a flat, grey desert.

We left the platform and walked down what had been a street to make a closer inspection. A heavy cordon of armed police ringed the city, and although they stopped and questioned all civilians we were allowed to pass in silence.

The corpse of Hiroshima lay cradled between distant hills and the waters of the Inland Sea, and as we walked down the ash-covered bitumen strip, the fierce sun of the Japanese summer lanced the blue water and made it dance and sparkle. Bright sunshine and a deep blue sky—that's how the papers said it had been on that other day just one month ago.…

The brooding silence was almost like a presence, and we spoke in low tones. For the first time since I had known them, Puteh and Kok Teen looked serious and troubled. We are told that even at Passchendaele the birds still twittered and sang above the shellfire, and that when the artillery barrage in Flanders ceased, men were amazed to hear nightingales. But here at Hiroshima there was only silence. There was no traffic; no trees rustled, no insect chirped, no bird sang. Footsteps were muffled by the ashes, and even the wind found nothing to sigh against. The policemen ringing the city stood motionless under the hot sun, and had it not been for the small groups of people digging and searching aimlessly in the debris it might have been simply a painted scene. There was a smell of death, and the silence was the silence of death.

A group of sweating men digging in the ruins stared at us dully as we passed. They wore gauze masks and we looked with pity and guilt at the two pathetic piles beside them … corpses on one side, bones on the other.

People walked past slowly, devoid of strength and spirit. Many had burns that were still raw; others were bandaged. A little girl trudged behind with her parents, and my eyes went from her shockingly disfigured face to the doll that she dragged listlessly in the ashes. I noted, irrelevantly, that her doll had slant eyes.

Everyone was in the grip of a strange apathy.

The only person in all Hiroshima showing any emotion was a Japanese, his arms caked to the elbows in ashes, who was

kneeling, clasping a battered clock. His back was towards us as we went by and we could not see his face, but he rocked backwards and forwards on his heels, and his sobs sounded shatteringly loud.

We four were the first non-Japanese into Hiroshima after the bomb, but we felt no sense of either history or triumph. Our brother Man went by crippled and burned, and we knew only shame and guilt.

I suppose that it all really began in Malaya on a January morning in 1942 when we saw Bill Peck making his way to our gun position with an air of suppressed excitement.

We were members of the Fourth Anti-Tank Regiment and, like the rest of the Eighth Division, we had never really expected that war would come to the "Land of Short Shadows." For more than six months we had sweated and trained, but all our hopes of seeing action had centred on a transfer to the Middle East.

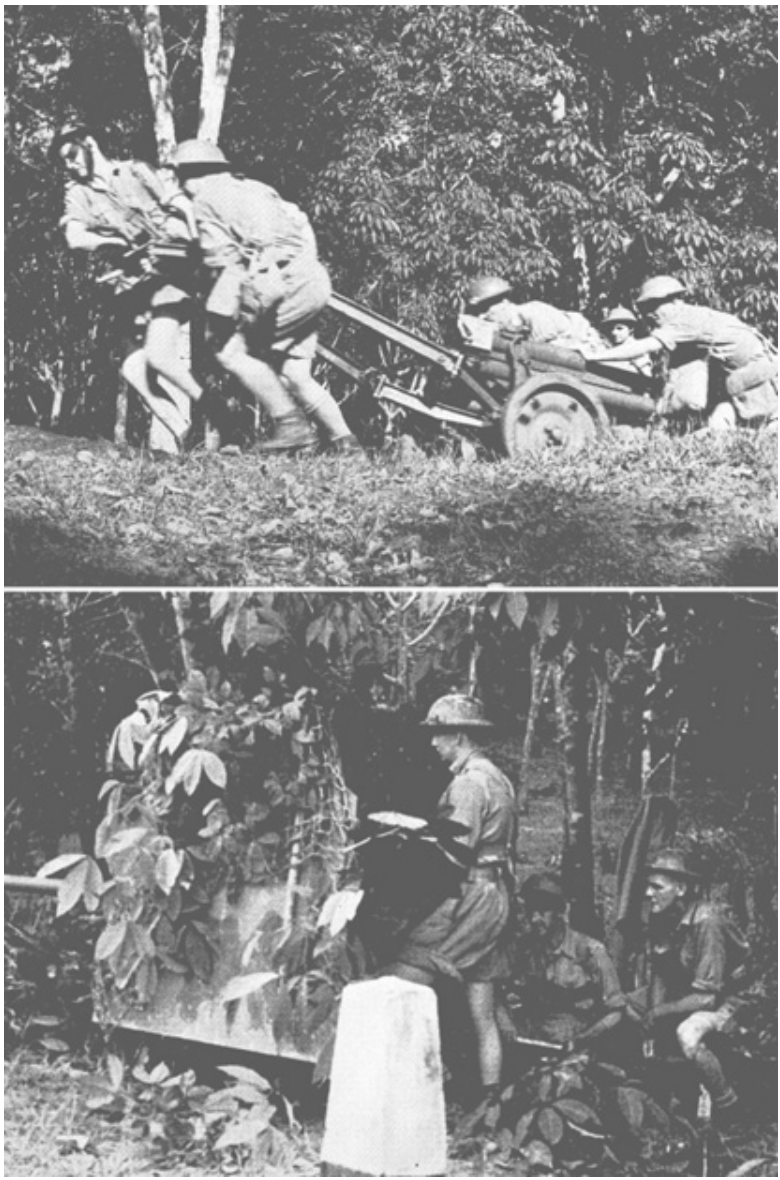
Then, dramatically, the Japanese had struck, and on 7 January had made an almost unopposed landing at Kota Bahru. But that was more than a month ago, and so far our sole participation in the war had consisted in reading how the British and Indian troops were being smashed aside as the Japanese pushed remorselessly down the peninsula towards Singapore.

In pre-war Malaya we had to contend with the jibes of friends in Tobruk and other such places who wrote, "You chaps go on having a good time—we'll do the fighting for you," etc., Now that war *had* come to Malaya we were taunted night after night by a suave-voiced gentleman broadcasting over Radio Tokyo. He had two favourite themes: "Australian rats, come out of your holes so that we may kill you," and "Sons of convicts, lay down your arms and the Imperial Navy will escort you safely back to your homeland."

Typical of his style was the night he began, "Hello, Aussies, have you asked your friends what happened at Slim River? Oh, by the way, boys, if you happen to have forgotten the password for tonight, it's *Redapple."*

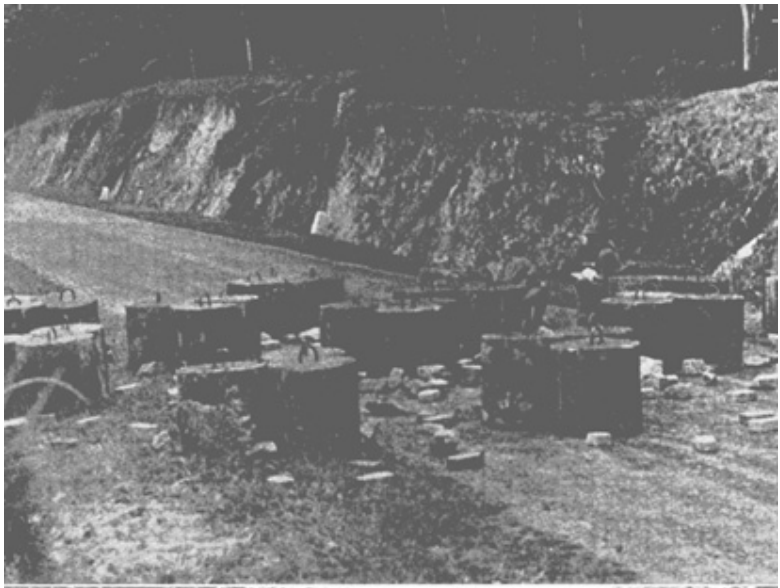
However, it took more than that to worry us at this stage, and looking back on it our confidence was truly amazing. This was due in part of the propaganda we received in large doses. Some of

the headlines in the local papers at the time read: JAP RIFLES USELESS. FILIPINO TAKES 10 BULLETS AND FIGHTS ON. ONE A.I.F. MAN IS EQUAL TO 10 JAPS. (This gem was from Gordon Bennett.) IMPOSSIBLE TO USE TANKS IN MALAYA.



A group of Fourth Anti-Tank men manoeuvring a Breda gun into position,

L to R—Joe Bull, Jock Taylor, and Sam Hibbert, after the battle. The gun was painted grey and green, and a net covered with leaves and branches from rubber trees draped over it.



The cutting with road block in position. The block consisted of concrete pylons with loose bricks scattered between them to disconcert the Japanese bicycle troops.

Two-pound anti-tank gun and Japanese tanks at Bakri, Malaya.

What was the true picture? In actual fact we were heavily outnumbered in everything that really counted. We were almost entirely without naval or air support, and there was not one British tank in all Malaya. Our High Command planned a campaign based on the belief that the country was not suited for tank warfare, and that in any case Malayan bridges would not support the weight of tanks. We were to pay a heavy price for this naive assumption.

Overall, we had more men than the Japanese, but, as they could always choose the place to strike, they had the greater numbers where and when it counted. We faced a tough, battle-hardened enemy, well supported by tanks, planes, and ships, and with sufficient experience, courage, and ruthless-ness to make full use of all advantages.

This was the position as Bill Peck approached our gun.

"Red light," Dick Voege warned us with a grin. "Here comes General MacArthur."

Lieutenant William Peck was our honoured troop commander. He was fair haired, well groomed, and despite a fierce moustache that sat oddly on his baby face, he looked perfectly harmless. Actually, Bill's language was extremely salty, and very seldom that of an officer and a gentleman. Now, smiling and eager, he came up to our gun and said crisply, "Righto, you bastards, up off your arses and gather around your Uncle William."

We assembled smartly, for despite his unorthodox style Bill was a fine officer and commanded respect. He surveyed us sternly for a moment and then said, "Right. I'll give it to you straight. The 2/30th are going to advance to Gemas to ambush the Japs, and two anti-tank guns are to go with them. Heaven knows why, but I've just been fighting the Colonel for you bastards." He paused for effect like the hammiest of ham actors, and then added, "Okay, pack up. You bunch of undeserving no-hopers are accompanying Charlie Parsons's gun to Gemas."

We were genuinely delighted. This meant that out of all the Australian troops in New Guinea, Timor, Malaya, and other bases, we were to have the honour of being the first to engage the Japanese. Indeed, in a sense we were being given the opportunity of creating military history. This would be the first battle on

record between Australia and Japan. We hoped to be worthy of the honour.

"Stupid clot,' said Jack McGlone disrespectfully, as he watched Bill walk away. "Why couldn't the great bastard keep his big mouth shut?" But his eyes were dancing and he could not stop grinning.

Dick Voege was equally lacking in respect. "I knew it had to be world-shaking news," he commented to no one in particular. "First time he's ever been here without trying to bludge a cup of coffee the moment he arrived."

But Dick, too, looked tolerably happy, and kept up a tuneless whistle as we packed.

By the grace of God and little else, I had emerged from the weird and wonderful lottery that the Army terms "promotion" as a Sergeant in charge of an anti-tank gun. I had been equally fortunate in the gun crew I had been given.

The Lance-Bombardier and second-in-charge was George McCracken, an orchardist owning considerable property in some of Australia's richest citrus-growing land. George was a little older than the rest of us, much better educated, and the only one who could be called a gentleman. Quiet, good-natured, and efficient, he was the most outstanding man among us.

The gun layer was Jack McGlone, a Cohuna boy, sturdy and efficient, with the sly humour of the countryman.

Our loader was Dick Hance, ever smiling and as quietly reliable as the other two. Dick had originally been a batman, which was almost incredible to us, but as soon as action seemed imminent he had become a very unsatisfactory batman indeed, and had kept at the authorities until he was transferred to a gun crew.

Our first "spare parts" man had been Wally Alberts, a young aboriginal boy. Wally was as likable as they come, but had a disconcerting habit of going walkabout just when he was needed, and would be found sitting somewhere in the jungle, blowing mournfully on a leaf, and dreaming of the sunburnt land that he was destined never to see again.

The new spare parts man was George Water, professional snake-catcher, ex-professional boxer. He was built like a tank, and tattoo'd from stem to stern with an assortment of entwining

snakes, scenes of the Crucifixion, ships in distress, flagrantly immodest dancing girls, and the word "Mother." George was certainly an unusual person in some ways but there could be no doubt of his physical strength and courage. I had a fugitive hope that the war might not last very long if George could frighten the Japs as much as he frightened me on the day that Diane, my pet monkey, stole his false teeth and chattered at us from an inaccessible spot under the hut while she played happily in the dirt with her fascinating new toy. On that occasion George ground his gums in truly awe-inspiring rage.

Our driver was Dick Voege, like George McCracken a son of Mildura, and the wag of the crew. We were a happy band and as a rule I had enough sense just to take the credit for any success that came from following their advice.

An hour later we hooked up our new gun—a two-pounder just out from England and the first one we had seen—and set off to join the 2/30th Battalion. Because of the great mass of vehicles streaming past *en route* for Singapore, progress was snail-like. Trucks, bren gun carriers, armoured cars, and sundry staff cars all poured past heading determinedly south, whereas we appeared to be the only vehicle going north—advancing. We began to feel singularly lonely. That night, camped outside Infantry H.Q., we were kept awake for a long time by the constant clatter and noise of the retreating armada. All troops which had been fighting north of Gemas were now being withdrawn to the rear, and the next move was up to the A.I.F.

Our morale was high, and we were truly delighted to be advancing, with the prospect of action. This was much better than waiting for the little yellow men to come and dig us out. Along with the rest of the Eighth Division, I felt quite sure that the Japanese advance would be rudely checked now that these sons of convicts, the Australian rats, were emerging from their holes.

The headlines of that day's paper read, JAPS NEARING STERNEST OPPOSITION. A.I.F. READY FOR ACTION. All else had been tried and had failed. Now the confident, much publicized Australians were advancing to centre stage. We carried with us the hopes and fears of all Malaya.

Charlie Parsons and I reported to the Commanding Officer of the 2/30th Battalion next morning, fully expecting, in our innocence, that we would be welcomed as an important addition to the force.

Lt-Col. Galleghan—universally known as "Black Jack"—was a forceful soldier of the old school who wielded his rank like a battle-axe and, in a few well-chosen and peppery phrases, he soon set us right on this score. The 2/30th was a New South Wales battalion, and was regarded as one of the "crack" infantry units in Malaya, and Black Jack made it quite clear that it was more than capable of handling the situation without interference from outsiders. He also made it very plain that he did not believe that tanks would be used against his men, and that he regarded the anti-tank detachment as little more than an encumbrance and a hindrance to his plans.

Unknown to us, Bill Peck had received a similar rough passage when he had reported to Lt-Col. Galleghan the previous day.

"Who the devil are you?" barked Galleghan.

"Lieutenant Peck, sir, of the Fourth Anti-Tank Regiment," Bill replied meekly. "I've been ordered to report to you with two anti-tank guns in support of your battalion."

Black Jack shot him a hard look. "Let's get this straight, Peck," he suggested, not unkindly. "You've been ordered to report with two guns under the command of the 2/30th Battalion."

Bill quaked inwardly, but replied firmly enough, "No, sir. I'm sorry, but my orders were *in support of* and not *under the command of.*"

Then began the battle of wills between the rather baby-faced, fair-haired Lieutenant and the hard-bitten, dark Lieutenant-Colonel who towered over him. For all his youth, Bill was not one to be bluffed, and he had his way. But this difference of opinion did help to explain the rather surprising reception Parsons and I got.

Permission was grudgingly given for us to take up our gun positions, which had been perfectly sited by our troop commander. Both guns straddled the main west coast road, and on the left, in full view, was the railway line, so that the two avenues of communication were well covered. The guns were only a few feet off the road, with Parsons's gun some fifty feet in

front and on the opposite side of the road. Charlie considered this was very thoughtful of Bill Peck.

The guns faced a cutting about two hundred yards up the road and, as there was a bend in the centre of the cutting, the tanks would be unable to sight us until they had committed themselves by turning the bend. The position was wide open to mortar attack, but we had a perfect field of fire right up the road, and we were quite happy about it. In fact when we first saw the position, although I am far from morbid, I involuntarily thought, "What a beautiful place to die!" There was lush grass underfoot, row on row of neat rubber trees on our right, and all around the eternal green of Malaya.

Later that day a third anti-tank gun arrived, with Sergeant Ken Bell in charge; it was promptly sent back as not required. This decision of Lt-Col Galleghan's was to have somewhat drastic results for his battalion.

The infantry plan was based on ambushing the Japanese, and patrols had mined the Gemencheh bridge, which was about one mile forward of the cutting. They were to lie hidden until the enemy had reached our road block, and then blow the bridge. After that they were to wipe out the Japanese troops trapped between the bridge and the cutting. Our role was to let the Japanese advance to the road block and then wipe them out with our machine-gun. This all sounded quite reasonable, but our Lewis gun was a veteran from the 1914-18 war, and would be breaking par if we got off one full magazine before it either blocked or fell to pieces. Still, relationships with Galleghan were strained, so we held our peace and hoped for the best. And as Dick Voege said with the most deadpan expression, "I can't really believe that the Japs would dare to attack the Lieutenant-Colonel."

At midday the last of the stragglers had passed through, somewhat hurriedly, and the road block of heavy concrete pylons was put into position. The code word was sent by radio, and from then on the two anti-tank guns were responsible for clearing the road of all enemy traffic.

The Brigadier visited us that morning and impressed on us what an honour it was to open the batting and strike first blow

for Australia. “Hit them out of the ground for six,” he suggested. He then completely spoilt the effect on leaving by bidding us “goodbye” in a tone of deepest gloom and melancholy.

After he had gone, Charlie and I went to inspect the road block, and to have a few words with the infantry section on top of the cutting. On the way back we met two Malays who were carrying blanket-covered parcels. As they were heading for the Japanese lines we stopped and searched them, and found the parcels contained rifles and ammunition. We handed the men over to Infantry H.Q. for questioning and that was the last we heard of them, but I fear—as fifth columnists had been a constant problem during the campaign—that we may have been responsible for the loss of two lives.

Those were desperate days for the people of Malaya, guilty and innocent alike.

At two o’clock a young infantry officer came to where Charlie and I were talking and for one wild moment I thought he was about to salute us. Instead he smiled and said, “Sergeant, I believe you chaps are now in charge of clearing the road. I want to take a few men a mile or so forward and bring back a stranded car. Can do?”

Charlie and I blinked at our sudden elevation to power, but our orders had been clear, and Charlie said, “Sorry, sir, the answer has to be no.” As the officer walked away, Charlie shook his head wonderingly. “Amazing. He actually looked disappointed. Hasn’t he heard about the Japanese?”

There was to be a strange sequel to this.

We had been standing by our gun since the arrival of the code word, and as the Japanese were said to be very close, we were keyed up and on the alert. At half-past two a sedan car came round the bend and stopped at the road block. A door opened and a small, khaki-clad figure emerged and trained his binoculars on us. This seemed to be precisely the kind of audacious Japanese trick about which we had been warned, and Jack swiftly swung the sights of the gun on to the car. “Shall I fire, Sarge?” he hissed urgently.

I had covered the driver with the machine-gun, but remembering the officer’s request, I hesitated. Then I

compromised: “Not yet, Jack, but open fire the moment they attempt to turn or reverse the car.” Then, with conscience satisfied, I took a good look through the sights, gave the first squeeze to the trigger, and waited.

Fortunately for everyone, the figure in khaki came down the road, and as he drew near we saw that he was a British officer. It turned out that he had sixty vehicles round the bend and required petrol for them. They were an Indian group which had been cut off by the rapid advance of the Japanese and had travelled south along minor roads in an effort to reach safety.

“Couldn’t see a scrap of life ... not a bloody thing,” he told us cheerfully. “But I knew that where there was a road block there just *had* to be men to cover it.”

“Just as well you used your head, mate,” commented a big infantryman. “There must have been a cuppla dozen guns lined up on ya.”

The officer laughed. “I could feel every one of them,” he assured us.

The vehicles were allowed to pass, and the road block was replaced. It seemed that the Japanese tiger was not yet breathing down our necks and we relaxed a little. Then at five o’clock came the tingling news that our forward patrols had ambushed the enemy, and that the battle of Gemas had begun. First reports were conflicting, but later we found that the ambush was a brilliant success. It had inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and checked their advance for the moment.

The Japanese made no further attempt to engage us that day, and as darkness fell we prepared to sleep by our gun.

It was a warm, dark night, and before turning in we talked quietly about our plan and tactics for the next day. Of one thing we were sure: come what might, we would not fail for lack of faith in each other.

We lay down, each preoccupied with his thoughts, wondering how he would face the test. There was tension in the air, and you could almost feel the Japanese out there in the night. I was irresistibly reminded of the scene of the night before the battle in *Henry the Fifth.* Very nervous, but at the same time exhilarated, I hoped fervently that fright would not betray and shame me the next day.

At midnight we were awakened by a terrific crash from the cutting; it turned out that a nervous but sensible infantryman had hurled a grenade at someone, or something, nosing around in the cutting. We settled down again, but it was an eerie feeling to stand in the deep silence and know that somewhere out in the darkness were thousands of implacable semi-barbarians whose one aim was to wound, rend, tear, or destroy our bodies by firing or pushing lumps of jagged metal into them.

The rest of the night passed without incident and at dawn we "stood to" with a heady feeling of excitement. At last the moment had come for which we had spent so much time training. We had one infantry battalion, less one company; four artillery guns and two anti-tank guns. All told we mustered about eight hundred men. No tanks and no planes.

Later we were to find that our opponents were the Fifth Japanese Division, plus the First Tank Regiment. The Fifth Division had been on active service in China from 1937 to 1941, and for the last six months had been rigorously trained in Hainan for the Malayan campaign. Compared with these battle-tested veterans, we were babies. Apart from firing six shots out to sea from a few old French 75s, none of us had ever handled an artillery gun since we enlisted. We were going into action with a two-pounder gun we had never fired, except in theory.

It was strictly amateurs versus professionals. Fortunately we were not aware of it.

CHAPTER TWO

A REPORT CAME that nine tanks had passed our forward patrols and were advancing to attack. We gulped and looked at each other, and at that moment our ears caught the sound of a dull, ominous rumble from beyond the cutting. Minutes later a tank of about twelve tons came slowly around the bend and halted well back, with only its turret and cannon showing above the slight rise in the centre of the cutting. Charlie immediately opened fire and I, most unwisely, followed suit. Each gun fired three shots without effect, whereupon the tank went swiftly into reverse and disappeared around the bend.

First blood to Nippon. The intruder, undoubtedly a reconnaissance tank, had discovered our strength and positions and had been able to escape without a scratch. I was rather disconcerted to find that I had no idea where our shells were hitting. The little two-pounders have a tremendous muzzle velocity, and in the heavy tropical atmosphere, and at such short range (about 250 yards), the tracer had no time to act.

The Japanese were not long in making their next move. Just before nine o'clock a light tank came round the bend. Seconds later a medium tank ranged up alongside it, and they both moved forward cautiously. We waited until they were almost at the road block before opening fire.

This time there was no mistake. Charlie stopped the medium tank with his first shot, and our second shell struck the light tank. It was stirring to watch the sheet of flame, and the turret top fly open as the crew attempted to escape from their blazing metal coffin.

We transferred our fire to the other tank, and I had Dick Hance change from armour-piercing to high explosive shells. These burst on contact, and the flash enabled me to see where we were hitting, and to adjust the sights accordingly. With both guns pounding away at it, the second tank did not return our fire for long but, try as we might, we could not set it on fire. Eventually our infantry sent a message, "Tank destroyed. Save ammunition." It was difficult to tell just how badly it was damaged because of the smoke and flame from the other one.

Charlie and I checked and were surprised to find that we had fired fifty-four shells during the brief action. There was a sizeable dent in our shield from a .5 machine-gun bullet, but otherwise we were untouched. We were all feeling particularly pleased with ourselves—but not for long.

The burning tank was putting up quite a spectacular display. Fire was leaping high in the air through the open turret, and every now and again a great sheet of flame and smoke would belch forth as the ammunition exploded. Judging by the dense black smoke drifting out of the side ventilators, a few bodies were being incarcerated too. The memory of this sight was often to be a grim consolation in the bitter years to come.

We were smugly contemplating our handiwork, when two figures in khaki ran up to the destroyed tank from the side and stopped with their backs to us, looking towards the enemy lines. After a few seconds they waved their arms, and four others joined them. They, too, came to the front of the tank and stopped with their backs towards us.

"What do you make of that, George?" I asked.

"Hard to say with all that smoke and flame," George replied thoughtfully. "But it could only be our forward troops falling back. Don't forget that the 2/30th have a section on top of the cutting."

For the next half-hour a thick black pall made it quite impossible to see what was happening in the cutting. Later the forward infantry told us that the Japanese had make a smoke screen by pouring oil over the burning tank. Suddenly we found ourselves caught on the hop. The tank, which we had thought was destroyed, came abruptly to life, and fired three rapid shots at the front gun before retreating. The infantry later said it had been towed back by another tank. We were mortified; our inexperience had been exposed already.

Charlie came back fuming. "I'm going to see the Lieutenant-Colonel about arranging better co-operation with the infantry … this is bloody ridiculous. Ken, you take over my gun while I'm gone, and I'll get more ammunition while I'm there."

I went forward to take charge of his gun, and George took over the rear gun. No sooner had I taken up my position than heavy rumbles heralded another attack. It was not surprising. By this

time the Japanese must have been convinced that they were dealing with complete idiots.

All the same, it did not seem like the Japanese to keep charging head-on. Perhaps if we had known about their spectacular success twelve days previously, when their tanks had broken through at Slim River, we might have understood their tactics better.

On that occasion four medium tanks had crashed through the defences of the Hyderabad Indian Regiment; overrun the 5/2nd Punjabs, and, running riot, had burst into the Argylls, creating great havoc; smashed into the 5/l4th Punjabs; roared past the 2/9th Gurkhas; and had caught the 2/lst Gurkha Rifles completely by surprise, shattering the battalion. They had raced on, shot up the 137 Field Regiment, which was parked peacefully on the side of the road, and had finally overrun the Headquarters of the 155 Field Regiment. Within six hours they had broken the British lines wide open, leaving a trail of havoc and disorganization in their wake, and had paved the way for one of the worst British defeats of World War II.

It is not surprising that the Japanese were keen to repeat this dramatic break-through, and that their next attack was made with tremendous courage and determination.

After a tense period of waiting, a small carrier covered with some form of screen came lurching and swaying round the bend.

“Open fire as soon as you feel sure you can hit it, Joe,” I told the gun layer. He waited a moment, then fired, and the carrier stopped abruptly. Japs began pouring out, but as they were running in all directions our second shell crashed home, and the carrier rose in the air and toppled on its side. It lay there with men crawling out like wood bugs from a burning log. Unfortunately there was no small arms fire concentrated on the road, so most of them got away.

We didn’t even have a chance to use our ancient machine-gun, for no sooner had we toppled the carrier than a large tank appeared, stopped behind the other, now almost burnt out in the centre of the road, and started blazing away at us. It was a most difficult target, as only the turret was exposed, so I asked Jock Taylor, the loader, to change to armour-piercing shells, and instructed Joe Bull to fire right through the burnt-out tank. As we

were trying to crash through, two more tanks ranged up, one on each side of the derelict, and began to give us the works *in toto.*

The Japanese, having discovered our strength and position, and having had evidence of our mentality, were attacking in force. Once our two anti-tank guns were knocked out, there would be nothing to stop them breaking through the 2/30th lines and rampaging through the unsuspecting rear columns as they had done at Slim River. Meanwhile, the Japanese infantry were being stoutly held by the 2/30th boys in the forward positions, but it seemed obvious that they would try a "hook" to get round behind us before long.

After six or seven shots had crashed through the derelict, the rear tank suddenly burst into flames and we had a momentary glimpse of the turret flying open, but what was man and what was smoke that came forth, we could not tell.

Our two guns had gone into action simultaneously, and now they were both pounding away hell for leather up the road. But two more tanks had entered the fight, and their fire was heavy if not accurate. At such short range we inevitably inflicted severe damage, but we were not having things all our own way.

The first casualty came when the loader, Jock Taylor, was struck on the head by shrapnel. As he fell, the breech of the gun, which was recoiling, struck him a sickening blow and smashed his shoulder. Jock crumpled in a sudden pool of blood, and lay moaning, "The breech, the breech, somebody load the breech." We had to leave him there as things were fast and furious. It was quite amazing how the tanks stood up to the pounding they were receiving, and it was later revealed that several had been towed back out of the way after we had set them ablaze. It must have been a cheering sight for the crews awaiting their turn to tackle the cutting.

The brave Japanese, indeed.

The heart of the cutting was now a blazing inferno, and it was not long before we suffered another casualty. There was a blinding flash and an explosion, and I found myself on my back looking up at the gun from a most unusual angle. I was certain that I was fatally wounded somewhere, but surprisingly, when I picked myself up and brushed away the dirt and cordite, everything was as good as new. Big Sam Hibbert, who had taken

Jock's place as loader, was not so fortunate and had received severe shrapnel wounds all down the left side of his face and body. He dragged himself away, and the battle went on.

From the hole under the gun it was obvious that some over-zealous fool in the tanks had fired a shell in under our shield. It had burst between Sam and me, and some freak of fate, or ballistics, had decreed that Sam should get the rough end. He died later, but Jock survived his wounds and spent the rest of the war in Australia, with his arm maimed for life.

Now Joe Bull and I were the only two left, so I took over the loading, and, spurred on by fear, did a pretty good job. The cutting was a spectacular mass of smoke and flame. I was so busy that for a moment I didn't notice that Joe had stopped firing.

"What's wrong, Joe?" I yelled.

Joe turned his face, almost comical in its anguish, and shouted, "Sorry, Sarge, I just can't see a target to fire at—there's too much smoke."

As he spoke there was a "whoosh" overhead—it was uncomfortably obvious that the Japanese, at least, could still see a target.

I put my mouth to Joe's ear. "Listen, Joe ... I tell you what. Divide the road into four sections and fire into each one in turn … you know, sweep from side to side."

Joe nodded, put his eye to the telescope, and gave the wheel a slight turn. I tapped him on the shoulder to signify that the gun was loaded, his foot pressed the pedal that fired the gun, and off we went once more.

We carried out this exercise several times until, with a shock that hit the pit of my stomach, I suddenly realized that we were down to fewer than twenty shells and had no way of getting more. I dug Joe in the ribs and shouted,

"Joe, we're in more strife than Flash Gordon—we're almost out of ammo. There's only one thing to do. You'll have to wait till we're fired at and then fire back at the red flash."

Joe gulped. "Crikey," he said; and at that moment the word expressed more than he could have said in a whole sentence. But he soon regained his composure, nodded calmly, and turned back to the sights. I almost added, "And for 'heaven's sake, don't miss,"

but one look at Joe's intent face told me this would have been an insult.

A nerve-racking game if ever there was one, I thought as I slammed another shell into the breech, tapped Joe on the shoulder, and then stood peering hopefully at the inferno up the road. Then there was a "whoomp" and a flash from the cutting, and something screamed by like an express train. This was followed by a deafening roar as Joe fired back at where a red flash had momentarily appeared amid the drifting pall of smoke; the breech flew open, hurling acrid cordite into our faces, and then the process started all over again.

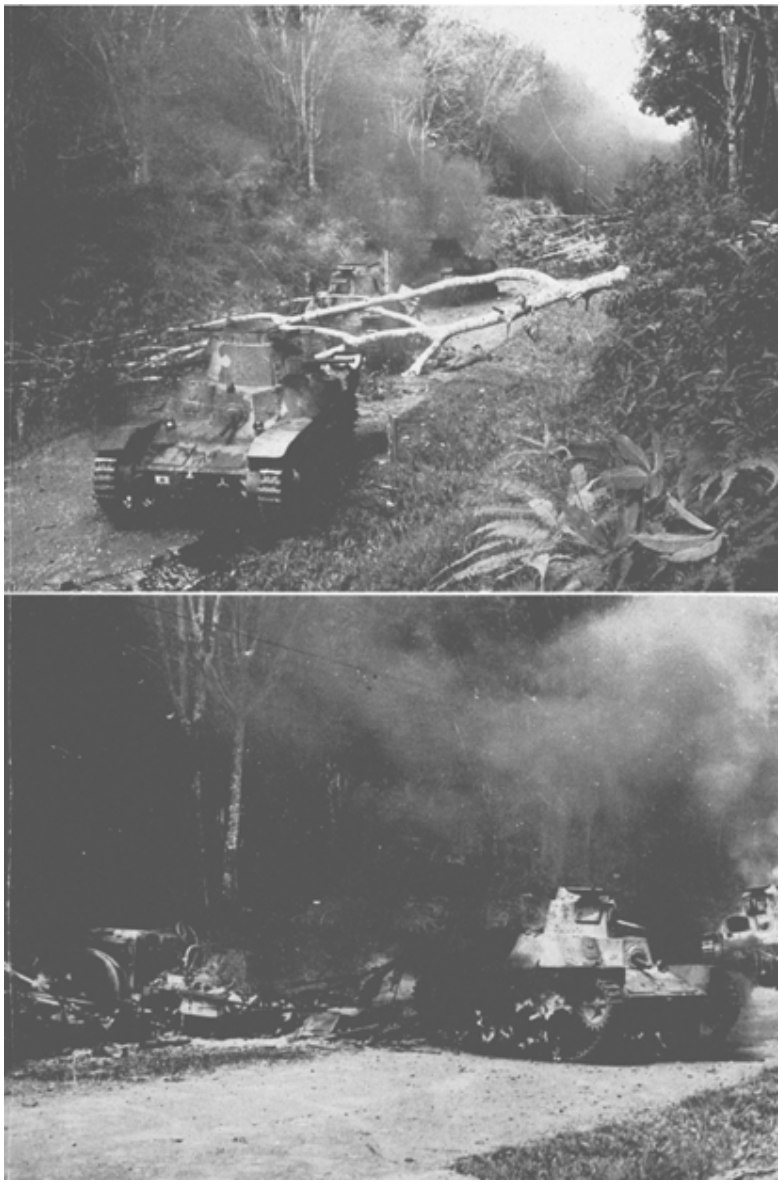
Under the circumstances the Japanese aiming was admirable, and time and again it was only luck that saved us. One shell brought a rubber tree crashing down in front of the gun. "I'm not sure if I can still fire, Sarge," shouted Joe.

"Don't bloody well try," I told him. "The bastards might think we've had it and go home."

No such luck. The Japanese persisted in trying to win the coconut shy, so, willy-nilly, we fired back through the tree, hoping desperately that we would not hit a thick branch thereby exploding the shell only a foot or so from the gun. However, the tree was obviously too big to shift, and I did not feel like venturing from behind the shield anyway.

The pace was too hot and too deadly to last, of course, and after a while the fire died down. The last shot was fired at us; Joe fired back and did not miss. Either that, or they had had enough for one day. In any case, we were left in possession of the field.

Our heads were ringing but unbowed, and we had exactly four shells.



After the battle. Taken by the Official War Correspondents.

View of the tanks from Clarrie Thornton's gun. They were shot up later in the day when the Japanese made what proved to be their last attempt to break through with tanks.

ADMONITION.

I have the honour of presenting you this admonition of peace from the standpoint of Nippon Samurai spirit. Nippon Army, Navy and Air-Force have conquered the Phillippine Islands and Hong Kong and annihilated the British Extreme-Oriental Fleet in the Southern Sea. The command of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Sea as well as the aviation power on the Western and Southern Asian Continent is now under the control of Nippon Force; India has risen in rebellion; Thai and Malay have been subjected to Nippon without having made any remarkable resistance. The war has been almost settled already and Malnya is under the Nippon's power. Since the 18th century, Singapore has been the starting point of the development of your country and the important junction of the civilizations of West and East. Our Army cannot suffer, as well as you, to see this district be burnt to ashes by the war. Traditionally when Nippon is at war, when she takes her arms, she is always based upon the loyalty of breaking wrong and helping right and she does not and never aim at the conquest of other nations nor the extension of her territories. The war course of this time is, as you are well informed, originated from this loyaltv. We want to establish a new order and a zone of mutual prosperity in the East-Orient. You cannot deny at the bottom of your impartial heart that it is divine will and humanity to give happiness to the millions of the East-Orientals mourning under the exploitation and persecution. Consequently, the Nippon Army, basing upon this great loyalty, attack without reserve those who resist against them, but not only the innocent people but also the surrenderer to them will be treated kindly according to the Samurai-ism. When I imagine the state of mind of you who have so well done your duty, isolated without any rescue and now surrounded by our Army, how much more could I not sincerely sympathize you. That is why, I dare to advise you to make peace and to give you a friendly hand to co-operate for the settelment of the Oriental Peace. Many tens of thousands of wives and children of your officers and soldiers are heartily waiting in their native land for the coming home of their husbands and fathers and many hundred thousands of innocent people are also passionately wishing to evade the calamity of war.

I expect you do considerate upon the eternal honour of the British tradition and you be persuaded by my admonition. Upon my words we don't kill you, treat you as officers and soldiers if you come to us. But if you resist against us we will give you swords.

Japanese bombers bring grief to two Chinese women in Singapore.

Copy of document dropped on the British forces in 1942 exhorting them to surrender to the Japanese Army.

CHAPTER THREE

JOE LEANED BACK in his layer's seat and stretched luxuriously. We exchanged comradely grins. He had been as steady as a rock during the action, and I thanked my stars for landing me with someone so calmly efficient.

The near-by infantrymen, who had wisely flattened themselves during the tank battle now came to life, and we were surprised to hear the sound of cheering coming from somewhere to the right of us. Curiously we peered in that direction and saw a group of five or six 2/30th boys waving their rifles in the air and shouting "Hooray" over and over again.

"Good Lord," Joe exclaimed incredulously. "They're cheering *us*."

We waved back rather lamely, but that was without doubt the proudest moment either of us will ever know.

Charlie Parsons, who had returned to the rear gun just as the last shots were being fired, came to us puffing and laden down with ammunition. I gave him Dick Hance to help replace the casualties and went back to the rear gun. I have told of the tank battle as it happened to me but George McCracken and the boys had matched our efforts in every way and must take at least equal credit for the tanks destroyed.

It soon became plain that friend Nippon had no intention of giving in so easily; a strong infantry push was reinforced by several light bombers that flew over, obviously looking for the anti-tank guns. They circled for almost twenty minutes before trying their luck. When they did start, their aim was so poor that all they did was make a lot of noise, a few craters, and a nervous wreck out of me.

Then, taking their time, they flew low up and down the road, machine-gunning all the time. There was something about being machine-gunned from the air that really made my blood curdle; my head seemed so terribly vulnerable. All the same, I don't think they ever really located our position, surprisingly, because the brass cases of all the shells we had fired lay around the gun, glinting in the afternoon sunlight. Only Jack McGlone showed

outstanding coolness during the air attack and remained in the layer's seat; the rest of us simply flattened ourselves on the ground.

The infantry fighting was quite heavy now, and we were perturbed to see men falling back from the right flank. They told us several tanks had entered the rubber trees on our right and had moved in among the infantry. The tanks had stopped out of our sight, and having thus turned themselves into "pill-boxes," were spraying the 2/30th with machine-gun and cannon fire. As the plan had been for an ambush, the infantry boys had not been allowed to dig trenches in case they were spotted by planes. Consequently they were helpless against these tanks and had no alternative but to fall back. This was when we really missed Ken Bell's antitank gun.

A few minutes later, Charlie, Joe, and Dick came running back from the front gun. Charlie was white faced. "Those bloody tanks in the rubber started to fire at us," he said, "and we couldn't turn the gun. That shell that got Sam Hibbert busted the traversing gear."

We hastily decided that there was a fifty-fifty chance of stopping them with our gun, as the tanks would have to pass between a lane of rubber trees on our right in order to get past us. Our truck was parked in a hollow among the rubber trees dangerously close to our firing position. "Take it back down the road a bit, Dick," I said. "And be ready to back up smartly when we need you." But no sooner had he taken up his new position than he was ordered to go two miles further down the road as it looked as if we would soon be surrounded. Dick, of course, had to obey, and that was the end of our transport.

The Japanese had edged in very close now. The rattle of our small arms fire, and the crashing of our twenty-five-pounders, still stoutly shelling the enemy rear lines, combined with the incessant Japanese mortar fire and the whoomping of the tank cannons made a deafening noise. The 2/30th were fighting doggedly, and more than held the Japanese on a man-to-man basis, but the outflanking of the anti-tank guns by the Japanese tanks gave them little chance of holding their positions.

Our plans were further hampered by a tree that had been uprooted by a mortar shell, and now lay obscuring our view, and

half blocking the lane down which we hoped to bag our tanks. I flew across the road and tried to shift it, but it wouldn't budge. Twice when I lifted my head something went thwack into its trunk beside me, convincing me that it was useless to persist.

Our next move was to pull down our camouflage net, which we did most reluctantly as the bombers were still cruising lazily overhead. Still, we had to swing the gun somehow. By this time the right flank was almost clear of infantry, and while we were wondering what to do, a big infantry officer appeared on the bank above us and shouted, "Sergeant So-and-so, for God's sake hold that flank until we can get the guns out"—a useless order since rifles were plainly no match for the tanks.

Seconds later a twenty-five-pounder artillery gun swung on to the road behind us and the withdrawal was on in earnest. A few stragglers came past, a wounded man dripping blood was dragged across the road on his backside, and we were left in sole possession of the right flank. To be honest, we didn't want it all that much. On our left the infantry were falling back slowly and in good order after fruitless attempts to withdraw the other three artillery guns that were hopelessly bogged in the mud.

"What a bastard," said Jack morosely. "Peckie was going to put Ken Bell's gun over on the right flank too, if he hadn't been sent back."

The tanks in the rubber made no effort to follow up the retreat, and simply contented themselves with firing at anything that moved. A fine fireworks display was taking place in the cutting where tanks, bodies, ammunition, and petrol were all burning and exploding merrily. The smoke was not quite as dense now, and it was possible to distinguish five burning tanks in addition to the carrier. Beyond the bend was another column of smoke; the infantry reported that this came from three more burnt out tanks.

Some twenty-four hours later, Ken Bell and his crew were captured near this area and, after having their arms bound behind them, were made to sit on the earth floor of a hut. During most of the following day they were savagely beaten by Japanese tank crews as a reprisal for the mauling we had given the First Tank Regiment.

Billy McGlone (brother of Jack McGlone, our gun layer) was

almost crazy with pain from repeated bashing and finally got to his feet and charged one of his tormentors. The Jap ran from Bill who, with his hands still tied behind him, returned to the group and sat with his head slumped between his knees.

The Jap then returned with others from his tank crew and, coming at Bill from behind, ran him through with a bayonet, savagely, again and again. Ken, Freddy Turner, and the other anti-tank boys were made to bury his body under the floor of the hut and then to resume their positions over his grave.

We were surveying this scene of destruction when a bren gun carrier appeared. A figure perched on top was shouting, "Pack up, we're pulling out!" It was Charlie.

Quickly we started to prepare the gun for towing, but the carrier driver was in no mood for hanging around and threatened to go unless we hooked up immediately. He was under strict orders to reach a rendezvous at a point two miles back within fifteen minutes. Of course the carrier had no hook, only a ring, the same as our gun. There was a pick head in the carrier and we decided to overlap the two rings and insert the pick head in between. Everything was in position and the pick head actually raised for insertion when the carrier gave a roar, and lurched forty yards or so down the road.

"Come back, you stupid bastard," Charlie yelled, but the only answer was an ultimatum to the effect that unless we hopped in immediately we would be left without transport.

It was a bitter blow to have to leave our little gun standing so forlornly in the middle of the road, and I writhed as I imagined the derisive laughter with which the Japanese would greet such an obvious sign of panic. I felt even more unhappy later when I realized how easily we could have pulled our light gun down the road.

Further down the road we found an apologetic Dick Voege waiting anxiously for us, and we lost no time in transferring into our own three-ton truck. Dick Hance and George Waters were missing, but it had been reported that they were helping the wounded to get to the rear. We were picking up wounded 2/30th men all the way back to Gemas, and when we got to the town itself, we took a fifteen-cwt. truck in tow. It, too, was packed with wounded men and had broken down. Our own truck was now so

crowded that Charlie and I had to ride on the running board.

We were just crawling up a long hill when a Japanese bomber flew over and circled menacingly above us. We were such a sitting shot that I stopped the truck and went to the back.

"Listen chaps ..." A mass of dirty, strained faces turned towards me: "There's a Jap bomber above us, and we're a sitting shot. We can go on and trust to luck, or get out and disperse on the side of the road. It's up to you chaps … what do you reckon?"

"Christ," said the man nearest to me—he was nursing a shattered leg—"That's a nice choice I must say. Thanks."

But a young N.C.O. cut in quickly. "A lot of these blokes are in a bad way, Sarge; they'd die on the side of the road. Let's push on, and to hell with the bombers."

There was a chorus of assent, and we started up again.

One infantryman, almost off his head with pain, picked up a bren gun and fired at the plane. As the lever of the bren gun was on single action it fired one shot only at the bomber, which was some 8,000 feet up. Nevertheless, when it flew off at that moment, he took full and immodest credit for having got rid of it. "Saved the bloody lot of youse. Should be right for a bloody medal after that," he kept saying, and nobody bothered to try to convince him that the plane had probably dropped all its bombs on Gemas earlier.

We told our sad tale of the lost gun at Fourth Anti-Tank H.Q. and later that evening we had to repeat the story for the Brigadier. He and his staff officers were delighted to learn that the tanks had been destroyed from the front, because the English anti-tank gunners had claimed that the tanks were invulnerable from the front on account of their heavy armour plating. The Brigadier did not seem unduly concerned about the loss of our gun. He said that up till then, 14 January, the English and Indian forces had lost twenty-three guns and destroyed five tanks.

We had not long been back at Sixteen Battery before two brand-new guns arrived for us from Singapore. The Commander of the Battery, Major Quick, commonly known as Big Red, summoned Charlie and me to his tent. "Sit down, Sergeants," he said. Then, without further preliminaries, "That was a particularly good show at Gemas, and I'm happy it was Sixteen Battery that did the trick." He tugged at his red moustache,

somewhat ill at ease, and then asked suddenly, “How do you feel about going back into action?”

Charlie’s answer came unhesitatingly, “Fine, sir.”

Had I been honest my answer would have been, “Bloody awful, thanks. I’ve been frightened ever since I heard the first shot fired. Let some other idiot have a bash.” But middle-class morality is a frightening thing, and to my horror I heard a voice uttering every relevant cliché and platitude possible, ending up with “We can’t wait to take another crack at them, sir.”

Major Quick positively beamed, and he said warmly, “I guessed that, Harrison. As a matter of fact I was so sure of both your reactions that I’ve detailed both your guns to go to Muar later today. Now, about your crews … any of them want to pull out and have a spell? They’re entitled to it, you know.”

He looked inquiringly at us, and then, as we made no answer, said quickly, “Yes, of course, of course. Well, good hunting and good luck.”

Big Red was doing the sensible thing. There were undoubtedly dozens of crews who would have done just as well as we if given the chance, but we were the only crews with battle experience, slight though it was.

I have since had reason to be grateful for this decision, for it gave us the honour of being the only men in Malaya to fight at both Gemas and Muar, where, from the A.I.F. point of view, the two main battles of the Malayan campaign were fought.

. . .

Charlie and I were given our choice of men to replace the battle casualties, and there was no lack of volunteers. Our small success at Gemas had lost nothing in the telling and soldiers are quick at any time to attach themselves to “lucky” guns. Dick Hance had turned up during the day so there was only one man to replace—George Waters. From the eager applicants we chose Jim Kerr and my good friend, Ken Daniel—and they were good choices. Jim, we found out later, was just sixteen the day we went into action.

Late that night we pulled out of Battery H.Q. to a chorus of “Good luck, fellas,” punctuated by the inevitable, “You’ll be

sorry." That was the last we saw of those men for more than a year; some we never saw again.

Next morning we met Lieutenant McCure, who was in charge of the four anti-tank guns—Charlie and I from the Sixteen Battery and Fred Peake and Clarrie Thornton from Thirteen Battery.

Like the majority of our officers, Bill McCure was both young and keen and he gave us all the information he had. In the light of what we discovered later, the reports from our Intelligence, which Bill passed on to us, were laughable. The official story was that two hundred Japanese had landed at Muar and were making a nuisance of themselves by sniping at traffic, though they did not as yet present a serious problem.

Still, I remember wondering a little when I noticed that a ten-mile strip along the Muar coast was shown on the map as Japanese-controlled. It seemed an awful lot of territory for two hundred men to hold against the Forty-fifth Indian Brigade, which had been fighting there for several days.

As it happened, we were to face some of Japan's finest troops. Our opponents were to be the Imperial Guards Division, one of Nippon's elite forces that had been fighting in South China for more than a year. They had also taken part in the occupation of Indo China in 1941. Tough boys.…

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MUAR TASK force consisted of almost the entire Victorian 2/29th Infantry Battalion plus the four anti-tank guns. The conference at which the formation of the Muar force had been announced was presided over by General Gordon Bennett. When the General had concluded his briefing, Bill McCure sought out the Commanding Officer of the 2/29th and asked, "Whereabouts in the convoy do you want the anti-tank guns, sir?"

The answer was as surprising as it was crushing: "For all I care, Mr McCure, you can take them back to base!"

There it was again—the strange, inexplicable reluctance of the infantry commanders to accept the freely offered antitank support.

I could think of two main reasons for this puzzling attitude. One was that almost certainly our leaders could have had no information about the previous exploits of the Japanese tanks. Lt-Col. Galleghan could not have known of the shambles the Japanese tanks made of the British lines at Slim River, and Lt-Col. Robertson could not have known of either Slim River, or of the tank attacks at Gemas. This did not say much for the efficiency of our Intelligence, but there could be no other explanation, for no sane commander who knew about the rout at Slim River could have been anything but eager for anti-tank support.

The second contributing factor was probably a reluctance to accept a semi-independent group into the Infantry orbit. All anti-tank guns in Malaya were sited and controlled by their troop commanders who, where anti-tank work was concerned, were naturally expected to be more expert in this field than an infantryman. But the crux of the matter lay in an exaggerated regard for rank: an anti-tank troop commander was a mere Second Lieutenant, whereas a battalion commander was a Lieutenant-Colonel.

The Muar task force reached the outskirts of Muar on the evening of 17 January, just in time to witness the collapse of the Indian resistance. The Forty-fifth Indian Brigade that had been holding this position consisted of the 4/9th Jats and the 7/6th Rajputani Rifles, with the 5/18th Royal Garwals in reserve. The

Japanese, who had been pouring into Muar from the sea, over which they held complete control, had made a strong push, and as darkness fell the Indians gave way to panic, piled into their trucks, and made a desperate bid to get away from Muar. The 2/29th immediately rushed forward to stem the Japanese advance, taking two anti-tank guns with them. Freddie Peake and I were ordered to guard Brigade Headquarters.

It took almost an hour to cover the one mile to our position, where we were confronted by a scene of utter chaos and confusion. The Indians were racing their engines in low gear, blowing their horns furiously, and shouting at each other, impeding the 2/29th who were doing their best to push through and rush troops and carriers up to the front line. Our big three-ton truck towing the gun along the usual narrow Malayan road was caught right in the middle of it all. We eventually got there, but not before we had knocked down a Police Station notice board and rammed an armoured car. At tight spots it was necessary to walk ahead of the car, waving a pistol, in the same way as men had to walk ahead of the early motor-cars waving a red flag.

Brigade Headquarters were located in a big mansion separated from the road by a large padang, or open field. The anti-tank guns were sent into the cover of rubber trees which flanked the padang. We and the 2/29th transport, who were also sheltering there, found ourselves in an awkward position, for the Indians were racing by with their headlights blazing and they picked out our position beautifully each time they passed.

No amount of yelling could induce them to dim their lights, and at last some of our men had to resort to taking pot shots at the lights as they approached. The Indians naturally thought they were being sniped at by the Japanese and fired back.

It was a ridiculous situation that demanded prompt action, and we all moved out on to the padang. It was a risky thing to do, but at least we knew where everybody was, and on a pitch-black night this was vital. Fortunately we ran out of Indians after a while, and soon a brooding peace hung over the area. But we could hear heavy gunfire from beyond the village of Bakri, where the 2/29th had met and stopped the Japanese.

During the night, in spite of determined opposition from the

2/15th Field Regiment, one of the forward observers estimated that the Japanese landed at least 5,000 men, in addition to twelve tanks, and numerous artillery guns. Once again we would have to face heavy odds.

At dawn we shifted back into the shelter of the rubber trees and, soon afterwards, orders came for one gun to go forward. Freddy Peake and I tossed. Freddy won, and off they went to join the infantry. I was not in the least sorry to lose the toss, for the reaction to Gemas had set in, and there was dead cold in the pit of my stomach. If the others were feeling the same, they covered up very well.

My reprieve was short lived. Only minutes later a message came through ordering us to take up a position on the Bakri crossroads. This time there was no one left to toss with, so off we went. At the crossroads we set the gun in position and, out of curiosity, had a careful look round.

Then a dispatch rider came racing up with orders for me to report to Lt-Col. Robertson. Leaving the boys and the truck, I went forward on foot to report to the C.O. A magnificent spectacle greeted me—six Japanese tanks spread out in a row along the road and burning nicely. The nearest tank was no more than forty feet from the muzzle of Charlie Parsons's gun.

It was strange, but here in the actual battle zone, with rifles cracking and dead and wounded all around, my foreboding and my nervousness vanished. The sight of the burning tanks acted like a stimulant, and I was filled with pride and exultation.

However, this was not the time to glory in it, and I pushed on to find Lt-Col. Robertson. The position he told us to take up looked a death trap on paper; it was nearly half a mile from the closest infantry support. But we decided to inspect the position before protesting, and Dick Hance and I went to the suggested spot, which was, in reality, even worse than it looked on the map. As we walked back along the jungle track, Dick and I were sniped at, and each succeeding shot was nearer the mark. This was rather disturbing, particularly as we were inside our own perimeter, but the mystery was solved when we looked towards our own lines and saw a group of 2/29th boys busily engaged in clearing some creeper to get a better shot at us. Violent waving and equally violent language soon established our Australian

identity beyond doubt, but for once we were heartily thankful that we were so short of machine-guns.

Once back with Lt-Col. Robertson, we politely declined the honour of taking up the proposed position. Naturally enough, this led to a little bickering, but we were stoutly backed up by Bill McCure, and eventually took up a position on the side of the road opposite Charlie Parsons's gun.

Early that morning a force of six Japanese tanks had clattered down the road in single file, and had made a determined and courageous attempt to break through our lines. Sergeant Thornton, whose gun was out of sight round a bend, immediately engaged them and succeeded in hitting the first, third, and fourth tanks. In spite of the shells that crashed into them, the tanks clattered on, and lurched past Thornton's gun; smoke poured from them, indicating that they had been badly hit. Although they were only a bare sixty yards from the advanced Japanese infantry, Clarrie and his crew dragged their gun on to the road, swung it round, and fired into the back of the retreating tanks. During this action Clarrie Thornton was severely wounded in the hip by a Japanese sniper, but he refused to leave his gun.

By now the leading tanks had turned the bend and were within range of the rear gun. The front tank had that within its womb which it did not like, and one can only guess at the scene of carnage and destruction from the shells that had hurtled and ricocheted so savagely around inside the cabin. But there existed at least one will and spirit within the tank and still it came doggedly on, leading the tank column but capable now only of walking pace as it neared the rear gun. Fortunately it never appeared to sight the rear anti-tank gun which was in a slight hollow on the side of the road. Or possibly only the driver still lived.

It was early morning and a mist hung over the road.

Only Charlie Parsons will ever really know why the tanks were allowed to get so close to the rear gun. It was either amazing coolness on his part, or possibly he momentarily forgot that *he* gave the fire order. Whatever the reason, Ken Daniel, the gun layer, waited tensely for a fire order until the tanks were less than forty yards away. Looking behind him expectantly, he was somewhat startled to see Charlie dancing up and down with

excitement. As the tanks were now so close that he had *three* in his sights at the one time, Ken was vastly relieved to hear Charlie shout "fire."

Now only a cool head and deadly accuracy could save them—there could be no second chances here. But Ken Daniel was equal to the occasion. His opening shot tore its way into the front tank, which jarred to an abrupt halt while the others piled up behind it on the narrow road. Ken then proceeded to destroy the first four tanks, one after the other. The shells crashed savagely, and the metal turrets clanged open as the crews attempted to escape from their smoking hearse, but there was an infantryman with a Vickers gun on the bank above them, and he sat there and coolly scythed them down as they appeared. It was not long before the last two tanks suffered the same fate as the others.

The entire action was a masterly piece of co-ordination. Not only had the 2/29th heavily machine-gunned any survivors from the tanks, but their mortar crews dropped shell after shell at very close range, which may have accounted for the fifth tank. Fortunately the tank crews had been taken completely by surprise and their fire was brief, erratic, and ineffectual. It was just as well, for one accurate shot would have been enough to put Charlie's gun out of action. Nevertheless, it was a gallant attempt, and had they broken through they might not only have caused heavy loss of life in the rear, but also prevented reinforcements reaching us.

Clarrie Thornton's courage in remaining by his gun was fittingly rewarded later in the morning when three more tanks made a determined effort to break through. In a fiery action Clarrie and his crew destroyed the tanks before they could get within a hundred yards of our lines. Then, and then only, would Clarrie consent to leave and get his hip treated.

This tank action was a most significant one, for it proved to be the last time that the Japanese made any real effort to use tanks in Malaya.

At ten o'clock that morning, Lt-Col. Robertson left for a conference at Brigade Headquarters. He rashly travelled on the pillion of a motor cycle, and on the way back he and his driver were ambushed and shot from the bike. The driver was badly wounded, but managed to stagger to the safety of our lines where

he gasped out his story. Five men who were standing near by immediately jumped into a bren gun carrier, raced to the scene of the ambush, and brought back the wounded Lieutenant-Colonel.

From their earliest training days in Malaya an antipathy had existed between Lieutenant Bill McCure of the Fourth Anti-Tank Regiment and Lt-Col. Robertson of the 2/29th Battalion, and the Muar campaign had done little to improve matters. But now Lt-Col. Robertson lay dying. He summoned McCure, and the two men looked at each other in the gloom of the rubber trees, McCure erect and strong, Robertson crumpled on a stretcher.

"Bill." As he spoke, the Lieutenant-Colonel grimaced with pain. "I was wrong. Terribly wrong. But for you and your guns not one of my boys would be alive now."

Ten minutes later he was dead; his body lay unheeded among his sorely pressed men. Ironically, his only bullet wound was in the leg, and his death was the result of the fall from the cycle.

The manner of the Lieutenant-Colonel's death was the first intimation we had that the Japanese were at our rear, and men were moved from the front and the flanks to meet this new threat. By early afternoon we were completely surrounded. The nearest British position was forty miles to the south.

Later that day the Japanese made a strong drive on our flank, and our infantry pulled back across the road to machine-gun the area. Feeling almost naked without infantry support, we took the gunsights and firing mechanism and joined them.

The tempo of the Japanese attack slackened after the machine-gunning and we took the opportunity of inspecting the shattered tanks. The officer in the front tank had committed *hara-kiri* by stopping a direct hit from a two-pound shell. In another tank the driver was still seated at the controls with an air of determination, but he had no head. And there were numerous charred bodies. We were interested in the stacks of "occupation" money—bundles of one and ten dollar bills—carried in the cabins.

Japanese snipers in the tree tops had been a menace all day and towards dusk an infantry section came over to clear the area before darkness set in. This was a dangerous game as the Japanese were well camouflaged and had a nasty habit of

dropping grenades as the patrols passed below. We saw an infantryman some seventy yards from us looking up hopefully for a target when a Japanese lobbed a grenade on him from a tree in his rear. The grenade hit him on the shoulder, bounced off, and failed to explode. He wheeled around as if stung by a hornet, sprayed the tree lavishly with his bren gun, and down came friend sniper, hurrying to meet his ancestors. *"Touché"* said George with a smile, and *touché* it was.

As evening approached we were cheered by the news that we were to be reinforced by the 2/19th Infantry Battalion next day. Then darkness dropped on us abruptly as it always does in Malaya and with its coming the tension and the strain sharpened. It was a moonless night and visibility under the trees was close to zero. Anxious eyes strained to pierce the warm, velvety darkness and imaginative ears hurried to convey all manner of alarms to receptive minds.

Fire flies caused many a finger to tighten on the trigger, and the wind rustling the trees brought its moments of wild speculation. Was that dark mass between those two trees really coming closer? Could that noise be caused by someone slithering towards us with a knife, or a grenade? Were those two dead Japanese on the roadside by the tanks really dead? The blood of heroes flowed but sluggishly through my veins and that morning I had felt them both for a pulse while holding a revolver to their heads as I did so. I remembered the cold, clammy flesh and the unmistakable stillness. Reason told me they *were* dead but imagination bestowed on them the gift of life and the power of vengeance, and I shivered superstitiously despite the warmth of the night.

Then, abruptly, the uneasy silence was shattered by screams and shouts that heralded a suicidal bayonet charge by the Japanese on our left flank. They rushed blindly forward, blundering into and bayoneting trees in their headlong, single-minded rush. For an Army that was usually a model of how to travel and fight with the lightest of equipment, the Japanese were oddly burdened down on this occasion. They were dressed in olive green and carried respirators, grenades, grenade dischargers, and digging tools. Many of the officers carried Samurai swords, and several machine-guns captured by the

infantry were fitted with bayonet attachments.

Screams of pain and yells of encouragement came from the Japanese as they charged again and again in the darkness. Charge, retire, regroup, charge. For the best part of an hour the 2/29th fought them off in an eerie battle in which friend shot friend and enemy lunged at enemy. Then the 2/29th brought their mortars into action and lobbed shell after shell on to the Japanese to prevent their reforming.

Two mortars were firing only a few yards away from the hole in which we lay and each time they fired the flash lit up our tense faces and the green trees about us. The flash also served to light the grim outline of the enemy tanks as they stood silently and menacingly in our midst.

It was possible to lie there and gauge how the attacks were faring just by listening to the fire orders … *"Range 300, 3 rounds, fire; down 50 yards, 6 rounds, fire; down 30 yards, 5 rounds, up 30, 6 rounds,"* and so on.

After what seemed hours, the yelling Japanese gave it up as a bad job and retired to lick their wounds. We were happy enough to say sayonara to them.

They were crazy fighters. During the night a dark figure came prowling around Clarrie Thornton's gun. Jim Tangie, who was on guard, called out, "Halt! Who's there?" the dark figure gave a strange chuckle and said, "Yimmy." Tangie immediately fired, and the intruder crumpled up. It was a Japanese private. He was apparently one of the forward infantry and had been close enough to hear the boys address Tangie as Jimmy. Unfortunately for him, his Japanese tongue had failed to master the alien name.

Finally, around three in the morning a somewhat brooding peace descended on the area, and, despite everything, our heads began to nod. Then, suddenly, we were alert. Was it a dream, or had a harsh, foreign voice shouted, "Yoh die, yoh die tommorroh." But then, as we listened tensely, another voice, loud and rough in the utter hush that had fallen, shouted, "Get stuffed, you yellow bastard," and we knew that it had not been a dream.

But there was a reassuring strength and purpose in that rough, disembodied Australian voice and, despite the fact that we were hopelessly out of touch with our main forces and had been pushed into an area not much larger than a football field, I felt

strangely secure. My head nodded again and as I dropped off to sleep I heard Dick and George chuckling by my side.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE JAPANESE RENEWED the attack at dawn, and during the morning the pressure increased.

George came back from speaking to the infantry, his face solemn.

"Sounds bad," he said. "They say the 2/19th can't get to us. They're still a mile or so back and they've got their hands full defending themselves, without trying to help us as well."

Jack's eyebrows went up. "Struth. What does that mean?"

George answered tersely. "Merely that there are more Japs behind us than in front." Then he smiled. "But look here, Jack, don't you go worrying about it. That's what we've got a Sergeant for."

A diversion was caused by the arrival of about two hundred Indian troops who, with the aid of the 2/29th, had succeeded in fighting their way into our lines. They were members of the 4/9th Jats who had been isolated when the Japanese occupied Muar and, although they were expected to act as reinforcements for us, their morale was so low that their value was limited.

The Jats had been on short rations for several days, and many were suffering badly from thirst. Our own water supply was dangerously low at this stage, but we gave them as much as we could spare. When the Indians lined up it turned out that many would only drink from their hands because of their religious beliefs. Inevitably, a lot of water spilled on the ground; an ugly situation threatened to develop, and we had to produce our pistols to restore order. Eventually they were given a fair share in bulk and left to work out their own method of distribution.

Poor devils—they had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. There were no slit trenches available for them, and they were sent past us to a position on a slope on the right flank. No sooner had they arrived than the Japanese bombers came over in low-level attacks. Although we were well hidden by the trees and the jungle, the tanks in the centre of our perimeter gave us away completely. All the enemy had to do was to drop bombs on either side of the tanks, and they could not fail to hit something. And

this is what they did.

Even so, the bombing part of it was not too bad; it was when the Japanese opened up with an artillery bombardment that the big trouble began. With the planes circling above and directing fire, the artillery was deadly accurate. They caught us in a "box" barrage, and hardly a shell was wasted.

Every now and then we heard a soft, ominous plop from the direction of Muar. This was followed seconds later by a shrill whine, the tops of the trees shook violently, and suddenly the ground flew up and hit us in the face. One great piece of shell came singing through the air, banged into our hole, and came to rest about ten inches from my glazed eyes. I stared, fascinated, at the jagged lump of iron, then picked it up to show the boys, only to drop it hastily. It was hot! Unfortunately I dropped it on Dick's bare leg.

"Clumsy sergeant bastard," he muttered irritably, but, spotting a minute scratch on his leg, he brightened up considerably. "Look," he said proudly. "Wounded in action!"

We were reasonably safe in a large hole where once a large tree had stood but none the less it was a nasty experience. The Japanese were firing in a regular box pattern and it was almost possible to tell where the next shell would land. As artillery men we could imagine the scene at Muar—the smoking recoil of the big gun, the sweating loaders ramming in the heavy shell, the careful and minute adjustment of the range that meant death to some and life to others, and finally the order to fire.

"Two more shells," said George soberly, "and I estimate the next will drop right on top of Jack's helmet." Normally one of us would have replied with a rather obvious wisecrack, but now even Dick was silent. As we waited tensely the time seemed to pass incredibly slowly. Then, for some reason the artillery fire switched to the other side of the road and we could breathe freely once more.

The Jats suffered most from the artillery fire and were badly knocked about. If they had remembered their elementary training and hugged the ground they would have come off more lightly, but when the Japanese dropped a shell very close, they panicked, and as soon as they heard that ominous plop from Muar they got up and ran. It was a slaughter. The explosion picked them up and

tossed them into the air, and they dropped to the ground in shattered fragments.

By late afternoon it was painfully obvious that we were in a death trap. The Japanese attacks were becoming heavier, our water supply was finished, ammunition was dangerously low, and the next night attack would probably overrun us. The Jats—the only troops that could be spared—were sent to clear the road block at our rear. When this attempt failed, it was decided that we should all withdraw and fight our way back to the 2/19th.

Bill McCure came up briskly and said, "Sergeant, the 2/29th will start to pull out in fifteen minutes. You are to pull out behind the last of them and cover their retreat in case of tanks. If the road is blocked, take the truck and gun as far as you can and then leave them until the road is cleared." Things were certainly serious.

The 2/29th moved out one company at a time, and as the last men passed we pulled out on to the road. We hadn't gone more than a few hundred yards when we found the road blocked by a string of abandoned trucks and cars.

"All out, men," I said. "Dick, will you bring the keys of the truck, and George you can take the gun sights and the firing mechanism."

Dick grimaced and asked, "Will I put a match to old Betsy Jane? No use leaving it here full of petrol for the Japanese is there?"

"No, just leave it, Dick," I told him, "the plan is to clear the road block and then come back for the transport. You don't think we're going to *walk* to Singapore, do you?"

It was not to be like that, anyway. Less than half a mile down the road we were stopped by a nest of machine-guns located in two houses, on either side of the road. Desperate efforts were made to shift them, but they were too cunningly sited. Mortars were the answer, of course, but we had long since run out of mortar ammunition and grenades. Our little group finally got to within fifty yards of the machine-guns; then we were holed up behind a shed adjoining one of the houses.

A large infantry officer took control. "Lads, those machine-guns must be stopped. I want four volunteers to go in and root them out with the bayonet."

We could hardly believe that he was serious. Four men with bayonets against machine-guns that had defied a whole company!

There was a sudden hush. We looked at each other—some shamefaced, some apprehensive, others defiant; but there were no volunteers.

"I'm sorry," the officer said. "Then I'll have to detail them."

He paused, and the tension could be felt. Then he named four men. I have never seen death so clearly written on men's faces. They knew that their task was suicidal, but they had no option. I would have refused point-blank either to go myself or to allow George and the others to be sent on such a mission. But we were not infantry and would have had a right to dispute his authority.

The Corporal rose slowly to his feet. "Well, come on, boys," he said, and his voice was heavy.... Their requiem was the sudden chattering of machine-guns and a wild burst of shouting from the Japanese.

It soon became apparent that we could not break through from the front, so we decided to run the gauntlet of machine-gun fire and make the eighty-yard dash to the jungle on our left, and then work our way through it to the 2/19th lines. There was no alternative, anyway.

I did some hard, quick thinking. It was obviously going to be a case of every man for himself, and it was equally obvious that the first men away would have the advantage of taking the Japanese by surprise. Also, machine-gunners would be more likely to concentrate on the main body than on a few men. "Take off with me," I told the boys, and when the Major said, "Okay, lads, away you go," I left the shed like a rocket and was among the leaders as we hit the open. No sooner had we cleared the shed than the machine-guns began to stutter.

Alas, I had always been a stayer rather than a sprinter, and by the time the survivors reached the edge of the jungle, I was stuck nicely in the middle of the field. There were five or six men scrambling to push their way along a narrow track, and when I heard the dull thwuck of bullets hitting them I took the hint and made my own track into the jungle.

The acting C.O. of the 2/29th, Major Olliff, was killed only a few feet away. He was almost in cover when a bullet shot off four fingers from his left hand. He stopped, completely shocked,

looked at his bloody hand in astonishment and said, “O God,” in an incredulous tone. As he spoke, a burst of fire ripped into his back.

Entering the jungle was like closing the door of a cathedral behind us. The dense growth seemed to soak up sound, and our first impression was of coolness and peace. But on looking round we were horrified to discover that there was nothing but deep swamp all around us and that our little piece of jungle was a virtual island. An island whose only escape route was barred by machine-guns.

It was now almost six o’clock in the evening and we were in single file skirting the edge of the swamp, when our own artillery commenced dropping twenty-five-pounder shells among us. The first shell took us completely by surprise and badly injured eight or nine men. The rest of the shelling found us flat on the ground, and, as the shells were falling in water or soft mud, not much damage occurred after that. All things are relative, of course, and to Claude Brown who had performed so well on Clarrie Thornton’s gun, one of the last shells to fall became the most important event of his young life. He was wounded and an injury at this stage was a virtual death sentence; so it proved for Claude.

Indeed, all the men seriously wounded here were to die. They were with us a little in body and in pain, but they were doomed as surely as if they had leukemia. It was our own fault that we were shelled, for we should never have been there. All troops oil the main road were supposed to be Japanese.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS ALMOST midnight and we were lying in the filthy Bakri swamps. The leaders of our party had pushed forward as far as they could without drowning. Behind us the Japanese had cut off any possible retreat with a ring of machine-guns. It was several hours since we had last heard the faint sounds of battle fade to the south, and we were faced with the sickening knowledge that our main force had been driven back, and that no help could be expected.

We had been trapped here since dusk, and repeated probing indicated that we were entirely surrounded by deep water except for the narrow corridor through which we had entered, and that was now well covered.

The Japanese, too experienced to come after us, had seen our predicament and were dropping flare after flare over the swamp, and spraying the area repeatedly with machine-gun fire. We lay half submerged in the stinking water listening to the groans of our wounded, punctuated by the stutter of the guns, and the hiss of bullets.

One young infantryman had been badly hurt when we had been shelled by our own artillery and was in agony. He kept crying out, begging a friend to shoot him. His sobs of "Shoot me, Jim, kill me," gave our position away to the Japanese. Each outburst was followed by a flare that bathed the scene in an unearthly green light, and then there was a burst of fire.

Eventually his friend did shoot him, but in the darkness he failed to hit a vital spot, and before the boy died he cried loudly in a shocked and bewildered voice, "Oh, Jim, what did you do that for?" Then silence fell again over the dark swamp.

We four were right at the rear of the line and were close enough to see flame coming from one gun each time it fired. Earlier in the night I had fired twice at the red flame, but on each occasion a flare had gone up in quick retaliation and machine-gun fire had scythed over us bringing cries of pain from those farther back.

As we lay there with the bullets hissing overhead, I felt the

position to be so desperate that I turned round to face the fire. Not from heroism, but to make a quick job of it. There is something about the thought of a bullet up the arse that offends me. A Freudian quirk, no doubt.

George McCracken slithered up to me, and for once his face was set in a grim expression.

"Look, we've *got* to get out of here by daylight," he whispered urgently, "we'll be sitting ducks if we're still here in the morning. They'll simply stand off and drop mortars on us, and not a man will get out alive."

"What do you suggest, George?" I asked feebly.

"Let's just push off—build rafts, swim, anything … better drown than stay here."

I could only agree, and try to shake off the lethargy of spirit into which I had fallen.

We slithered cautiously to Dick and Jack but no sooner had we finalized our plans to push off independently than the electrifying news rippled up and down the line that the passage so desperately needed had been found.

We spent the next hour wading in swamp water up to the neck, tripping over snags, swimming small creeks, and pushing through tiger lilies, until at last we waded on to dry ground. After that festering swamp nothing could have been more pleasant than the smell of sweet grass, and while the officers were forming the men into groups, I lay there and gave thanks to God.

When we were finally assembled I was astonished to find that there were nearly a hundred and fifty men, many of whom were Indians. It was obvious that the 2/19th had been driven well back from Bakri and, as it was hopeless to try to catch them up, we decided to march across country to Yong Peng, which was in the line of their retreat, and about twenty-five miles away as the crow flies.

It was hard in the darkness; the head of the column kept losing contact with the tail, which made progress appallingly slow. At four o'clock we stopped, and rested until daybreak. It was unwise to stop, of course, but the infantry were very close to the limit of their endurance.

It was the worst of bad luck that we had not pushed on just a

little farther, for daylight revealed half a mile of open ground in our path. Under cover of darkness we would have crossed it in about quarter of an hour, but as the Japanese planes were out looking for us at first light, we had no option but to skirt it through jungle and swamp. We struggled and sweated in waist-high swamps and lost almost five hours in covering that half-mile. No chance now of racing the Japanese to Yong Peng.

The Zeros were flying very low over the tree tops, forcing us to stay well under cover. They dropped a bomb here and there, but each time it was wide of the mark. The Indians gave us a lot of bother. They shambled along in the rear, and there were numerous halts while they were rounded up and made to rejoin the column. Their hearts were obviously not in this campaign. In their own familiar environment they are a proud and warrior-like race, but they were not interested in fighting other men's battles. Moreover, many had been badly unnerved by the savagery of the Japanese who had captured some of their comrades in the fighting up north, and had put out their eyes and sent them back to the British lines as a grim warning.

. . .

The long column pushed on steadily until the middle of the fo11owing day, when we halted at a large house for a much-needed rest. The Chinese here insisted that we leave four of the more seriously wounded men with them, and also provided us with a guide to lead us to Yong Peng. We had our first meal here since the escape from the swamps—four cubes of pineapple each!

We spent the entire afternoon wading through the hottest swamp imaginable. To keep from completely dehydrating we drank the water contained in the swamp bell flowers. These flowers hang upside down on the swamp trees, and if you are careful not to stir the sediment at the bottom, each one yields a small teaspoonful of very sweet water. Our Chinese guide solemnly warned us to be careful. Too much of this water, he said, would make us impotent.

As darkness fell the air was filled with a beautiful smell of burning leaves and slightly damp wood as the evening meal was cooked. Soon afterwards, our smiling guide led us into a small

Chinese village. The inhabitants made us very welcome and quickly produced steaming plates of chicken and rice. This was, of course, delicious, but what we appreciated most was the chance to bathe our feet, which by that time were in a sad state.

We reluctantly left these kindly people that same night, and daylight found us at the village of Khangkar where we were greeted with the ominous news that the Japanese had been there the night before, and had taken all the bicycles and pushed on southwards. There were still another twelve miles of jungle between us and Yong Peng; we had lost the race. Now, alas, we could not even retreat fast enough.

The officers held a conference and decided that we should split up into small groups and make our ways separately. I thought at the time this was rather a mistake. We were a large force armed with rifles, tommy-guns, and grenades, most of them salvaged from some abandoned trucks we had stumbled on, and were quite capable of handling any patrols or small groups which we might encounter. Now our strength was to be dissipated.

There were eleven anti-tank men left and we unanimously elected to stay together, with Bill McCure as our leader. We took copies of the officers' maps, and retired into the jungle for a good rest and a conference. Freddie Peak and Bill McCure suggested that we head for Malacca, a town where they had many friends, and there buy or steal a boat, sail across to Sumatra, and then travel south by foot until we were opposite Singapore. We would then steal another boat and sail across to the Lion City. I knew the plan was far from sound, but the adventure was irresistible and I agreed. We put the plan to the others and they also voted in favour.

It was obviously going to take at least a week to carry out, and we thought it might be an idea to have a good night's sleep before setting off. But we had not bargained on the rain that pelted down as we huddled under the dripping trees. When it stopped we found ourselves wishing it hadn't, for the mosquitoes that followed were infinitely worse. Near by, a bird was whistling a mournful tune over and over, and I couldn't help feeling it was a bad omen.

The next morning we retraced our steps to the house where we had left our wounded. The Chinese there told us that they were

taking them into the hills next day, and that one was not expected to live. In fact, none of them was ever heard of again.

We all had a bathe and a shave in a creek before we left, for it was important for both morale and safety that we did not look too obviously like fugitives. The rest of our journey to the Portuguese settlement at Malacca was to be by compass, and we set off across country under an incredibly huge full moon.

At three o'clock the following day we walked into Bukit Pengkalan, a small Chinese village clinging to the bank of the Muar River. Unfortunately the Muar at this point was almost half a mile wide and notoriously full of crocodiles. We searched for boats, but the villagers told us that "Jepun" had commandeered all boats and sampans the previous day.

George and Dick were resignedly pulling down a deserted house in order to build a raft when an old Chinese gentleman appeared and said quite casually, "We are your friends, the Chinese Communists. We will take you to Kluang if you desire."

He told us that the Communists had guided two hundred British soldiers to Kluang only forty-eight hours earlier. A second look at the swirling waters and the mangrove swamp on the far bank convinced us that it would be wise to accept his offer, especially when we learnt that the Japanese had only just left the village.

They supplied us with rice and coffee, and we left under cover of darkness. Our zealous guide set a terrific pace, which he kept up all night, and it was a great relief when he lost the track in the early hours of the morning, and we had to wait for daylight to pick it up again. Our feet were in a terrible condition. Our boots were now as hard as iron and there was nothing to do when the skin rubbed away but to cut out that section of leather, and then, of course, the leeches were in heaven.

At the next village an aged Chinese with a classical mandarin beard shuffled up to us and asked in perfect English, "Which city do you prefer, Melbourne or Sydney?"

He was a fine old man and had recognized the badges on our shoulders. He had once lived in Bourke Street, Melbourne, and we enjoyed a nostalgic chat in this tiny, obscure village in the heart of the Johore jungle. He warned us not to trust the Malays. (The Chinese always regarded them as being pro-Japanese.) It

was with a real sense of regret that we said goodbye to the smiling villagers and to our old friend, but the Japanese were due back to collect vegetables in half an hour, so we dared not stay.

Our guide led us to a hut, where we were surprised to find sixteen men of the 2/29th Battalion who were also waiting to be taken to Kluang. We stayed inside the hut all day, as the Chinese were most suspicious of the local Malays, but endless piles of rice and chicken were cooked for us and there were few complaints.

That evening we were treated to a fiery speech by the local leader of the Communists. His political views didn't affect us much one way or the other, but his aggressiveness towards the Japanese and his air of determination were inspiring. He concluded by wishing us good luck and added with great feeling, "When you get back to your own people, you must fight tooth and nail to drive the yellow dwarf out of Malaya."

That night our guide led us down the main road for several miles. This seemed very risky, and we kept glancing anxiously behind us. Later we became quite blase about main roads. At daybreak we turned off the road and plunged into a jungle track, which we followed almost all day. We breakfasted on flapjacks by a lonely jungle creek, but from then on it was a non-stop trek.

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the jungle, for most of the time following elephant tracks. Noting our surprise, our guide smiled. "All tracks in jungle are old elephant tracks, otherwise too much work," he said.

By four o'clock we had not seen the sun for more than five hours and we were beginning to wonder if we would ever see it again. The dank jungle was a depressing place, with its dead and rotting undergrowth, and its uncanny, unwholesome stillness.

We came to a Sakai village in a tiny clearing and while our guide jabbered to them we marvelled at the long blowpipes that were much bigger than the pygmies who carried them with such an air of menace.

By evening, despite our forebodings, we were at the local Communist Headquarters, which was a large bamboo barracks built on the fringe of the jungle about six miles from Craah. The place and the people had an air of comic opera about them, although the situation was anything but funny. The Chinese were armed to the teeth with an assortment of weapons—Mausers,

Colts, Scotts, Winchesters, and any number of others both obsolete and modern. We saw a number of slim, smiling Chinese youths with two pistols bholstered Wild West fashion, as well as a wicked-looking knife in their belts. Their fighting spirit was magnificent and we wondered, not for the first time, how the British could have rejected the Chinese Communist offer to provide troops to fight alongside the Allied Forces in the defence of Malaya.

The Communists were eager to buy weapons of any kind, but we were unable to help. On the long, wearisome marches through the swamps many of the men had thrown away their heavy rifles, and the only weapon we had was my own Colt .45 that I had bought in Singapore before the war. It had proved valuable on guard duties where we had all used it in preference to the heavy, unwieldy. 303 Lee-Enfield, and in any case it had every advantage over a rifle when it came to close-range jungle fighting. Unfortunately the only ammunition I had been able to obtain for it were soft-nosed bullets, which were strictly outlawed by every rule of warfare because they expanded after striking. But it was those bullets or nothing.

The head-man of the group was a surprisingly young man, addressed by his followers as Chan.

“You must wait patiently,” he told us reprovingly. “A guide has left to blaze a track through the jungle to Kluang. He will come one, two days, and soon you will join your friends again.”

Jack, the level-headed, logical countryman, asked, “But how did you get the other two hundred British soldiers to Kluang? You know, the two hundred we were told about.”

Chan smiled, but there was a hint of evasiveness in his reply. “They go from other part of Johore. You wait patiently. Guide will come.”

Then he changed the subject. “We need men like you soldiers for instructors. My young men are keen, but they

A propaganda leaflet dropped on Malaya by the Japanese. It shows Nippon and Islam clasping hands in friendship while John Bull Churchill drops his cigar in dismay.

A Japanese leaflet designed to impress on the Indian troops the futility of opposing the Nippon Army.

Propaganda inciting the Malays—"Look what the cruel Australian soldiers have

done to this Malay's wrist."

Here is one reason why the Puduites thought that Australia would be invaded. It is a £1 note printed by the Japanese, They intended to use it in Australia after the invasion.

Japanese occupation money used in Malaya. It was a note similar to this with which I paid Ming for the bike.

shoot bad and do not always obey my order. Will some of you stay as instructor? It is best way to beat the yellow dwarf."

Bill McCure was firm. "No, we couldn't consider it. We're trained anti-tank gunners and that's our job. We're not cut out for jungle fighting."

Bill was right, of course, but I would love to have stayed and fought with the Chinese.

We spent two quiet days reading Communist propaganda magazines and talking with the ring of sentries around the camp. They were all very young and, like most Chinese, were slim and clean looking. And they all had one thing in common—they hated the Japanese, with a fierce hatred.

We woke on the morning of 30 January feeling restless and uneasy at the lack of action. It was now eleven days since our escape from the swamps. Just as we were considering some form of definite action, Chan came to our hut with an unusually solemn face. "Chan is sorry to bring bad news," he said. "Your friends have been driven from Kluang and now fight only fifty kilometres from Singapore. Please wait and we will make new plans for your safety." And he left.

"Bulldust," Freddie Peake said. "Kluang wouldn't go that quickly, I'll bet."

"You've got something there," Bill McCure agreed. "I don't pretend to be in Gordon Bennett's confidence, but I do know that the whole defence plan of Malaya is built around Kluang—it's the keystone. No, I won't buy that one. Kluang hasn't fallen, that's for sure."

CHAPTER SEVEN

NEXT MORNING TWO British officers strode into the camp. When we had assembled, one of them addressed us: "Smiley's my name. I'm a Pommy and I'm in charge of a group of four Malay volunteers who are doing active guerrilla work. We were deliberately left behind when the Nips advanced, and we've plenty of explosives and supplies. But we *are* short handed and that's why I'm here. I want four volunteers to help us for about three months. I can assure you there's important work to be done." Then his eyes twinkled. "No guarantee mind you, but I don't think you'll be bored."

Smiley was a giant of a man and looked as tough as old teak. He had something of the dashing air of the corsair, or the pirate captain about him. I was completely fascinated. "How about it?" I whispered to George. "It could be fun." George—reasonable and considerate—answered, "I'm not so sure about the fun, but it does sound as if they need us. Okay, let's give it a go for three months and see what happens … but what about the other two?"

Dick, when he was approached, laughed and said, "I'm a driver, not a bloody commando, thanks. Besides, I want to grow oranges after the war. See you back on the gun."

And when I asked Jack, "Reckon you could manage without us for three months?" he looked at me with a deadpan expression and said, "Better," then turned away quickly to hide a sly grin.

After dark that night we made the sixteen-mile journey to the guerrilla camp, which was situated on the Soofin Palm Oil estate, said to be the largest of its kind in the world. We slept soundly under the palms for the rest of the night and most of the following day.

Late in the afternoon Smiley managed to get a wireless set working for the first time in many days, and we were dismayed to hear that our troops had been driven off the mainland, and were now fighting on Singapore Island itself.

As a result, our plans were radically changed, and it was decided that the whole party would stay with the guerrillas and help complete the assignments quickly. Then, with the help of the

Chinese Communists, we would make our way to Singapore. Smiley immediately formed us into three sections. We four found ourselves in Section 3 under a Lieutenant Les Taylor.

With so many extra people in the camp, the food position was a source of concern to Smiley, and the next night we went looking for goats so that at least we would have a milk supply. We soon found that in wartime Malaya the shrewd native kept his goat in his hut at night. We did, however, come across a small pig, which we promptly appropriated. The squealing woke its owner who, although prudent enough to remain in bed, added his loud laments to those of the pig. There seemed to be enough din to rouse the entire Japanese army. “We’d better do something about it,” Smiley grinned. He shifted the wriggling pig to his left side, pulled his revolver from the holster, and fired two shots into the air.

The twofold lamentation ceased abruptly.

The following day George and I set off to where the guerrillas had a sentry post on a hill near the camp. We saw many large bombers droning over on their way to Singapore, and we assumed this meant that the Japanese were now using the captured airfields at Kuala Lumpur.

Something was moving below us. Looking more closely we were surprised to see a trainload of Japanese soldiers and tanks come steaming slowly down the main west coast line. It was hard to believe this was a wartime scene. The Japanese were on open platforms, basking in the sun, and swinging their legs over the side as if they had not a care in the world. It was hard to resist the temptation to fire a few shots at them just to see the panic However, we made immediate plans to sabotage the line, and that same night we went to Labis, and laid a load of dynamite under the rails on a bridge. It was going to be bad luck for the next troop train that used our line so casually.

Some time later a middle-aged Chinese blundered into our camp. He was obviously trying to tell us something, but no one could understand him, and we had to wait until Ah Sing, our guide and interpreter returned next day.

When he did come back he brought the startling news that there were six hundred Japanese troops camped on the same estate as ourselves, and that the Japanese were now using

“puppet” Chinese troops from occupied China. This made things look grim for our prisoner and, unfortunately, not even Ah Sing could understand his dialect. After a long debate, the guerrillas came to the conclusion that, for the safety of the entire party, he must be put to death. We had no guarantee that he wasn’t a spy.

When I last saw the prisoner he was being guarded by Jack McGlone, who was covering him with a rifle. I tossed him my revolver, saying, “Here, use this. It’s a lot lighter than that old blunderbuss of yours.”

Later in the morning we were playing cards under the palms when a fearful squealing came from the far end of the camp. As there were pig traps there, we took it for granted we had caught a wild pig, and Dick was about to investigate when the noise stopped.

Just then Jack came slowly through the trees with a white face and blood-stained hands. He held out the revolver. “Here’s your gun. Do you still want it?”

It was covered in blood, the trigger guard was so bent that the gun could not be fired, and a piece had been chipped from the butt. It seemed they had taken the prisoner away to kill him but, as there were Tamils in the vicinity, they dared not risk a shot, and Jack had been ordered to stun him with the revolver. The Chinese had put up a spirited fight for his life, and the .45 Colt proved too light for the job. One of the guerrillas finished the job by knifing him five times in the throat. They buried him in the pig trap.

The episode was a sad one. The guerrillas had a duty to do, and anything that stood in the way had to be removed. But it was terribly unfortunate that it had to be a Chinese to suffer. They had been wonderful friends to us and, if this man was a spy, he was the only informer we encountered in all our travels. Every other Chinese man, woman, and child whom we met, ran the most dangerous risks to help us and did it as a matter of course. I have often wondered what family waited anxiously and with increasing dismay for the father who never returned.

Two nights in a row we set out to ambush a Japanese truck in the hope of replenishing our food and ammunition. We split into two groups, and one moved off ahead of the other. The front one had a system of signalling back with a light when the victim had

been selected. Unfortunately for us the Japanese always travelled in convoy, and we were never able to find a straggler to pick off.

Several times we were on the point of attacking a convoy of three trucks when another series of headlights appeared in the distance.

The combination that we required—a small isolated number of trucks—never appeared, and the Japanese sped by, often smoking, sometimes laughing and joking, but always completely oblivious of the men who crouched by the roadside with grenades and tommy guns. Their Sun God certainly smiled on his children that night.

We repeatedly had so little success in obtaining food that eventually Smiley decided that the newcomers must leave the camp and make their own way to safety. There were too many of us to make an efficient guerrilla organization.

We four resolved to stick together and resume our old plan of getting to Sumatra. Two other parties were formed; one of seven anti-tank men under Sergeant Freddie Peake, and the other of sixteen infantrymen under Sergeant Mick Gibbons. Bill McCure decided to cast in his lot with the guerrillas who intended to continue with sabotage work for another three months before making for Singapore. As it turned out they were there for three and a half years. They owed their survival mainly to the efforts of the faithful Chinese, though at times they were reduced to eating snails, roots, lizards, and even monkeys. It was not until the Japanese surrendered that they staggered out, emaciated and weak. It was an outstanding feat of tenacity.

Freddie Peake and his six men left with the same plan as ourselves—Sumatra. Once during the night they passed us as we lay hidden by the roadside, and we watched them go by, and heard low voices and a soft laugh as their dim figures blurred into the darkness. They were never seen again.

A crescent moon was low on the horizon as we came to the main west coast road and for a moment we lay quietly, listening for the sound of Japanese traffic. All seemed to be quiet, so we turned our backs on the road to Singapore, and headed into Japanese-held territory. George alarmed us by complaining of fever, and after covering only seven miles we stopped to sleep in some bushes on the near side of a bridge. We had passed several

burnt-out wrecks of cars and trucks along the way, but otherwise our progress had been uneventful.

The sound of gentle tapping awoke us at daybreak and we literally froze to see a large group of Japanese soldiers working only thirty feet away from us. They were busily engaged repairing the wrecked bridge, and we lost no time in huddling behind two camouflaged gas capes we were carrying. Just as we were about to beat a hasty retreat, we heard the sound of motors, and soon convoy after convoy of Japanese vehicles came streaming down the road, Singapore-bound—bread vans, ice-cream trucks, funeral hearses, in fact anything with wheels. Some of the cars were flying red and blue pennants and we saw that these cars carried officers. There had been no attempt at camouflage, and the fact that officers could advertise their presence said a lot.

As soon as it was safe to move we backed into deeper cover, and then resumed our journey.

In the warmth of the early afternoon our march seemed more like a pleasant stroll through the countryside. We took care, however, always to keep the road on our right. Towards evening we stopped at a Chinese house. We had quickly learnt to distinguish between Chinese and Malay houses, and we were also becoming expert in putting out feelers for food. In this regard the Chinese were magnificent. Not once in all our travels did we meet with a refusal, and no matter how poor or small the house, always we were taken in and given what they had. Sometimes, after seeing the obvious poverty of a Chinese peasant we would feel ashamed and try to withdraw, but always came the anxious insistence that turned into smiles and nods of pleasure as we ate. God bless them. Christ himself could not have wished to meet more complete charity and selflessness.

In spite of the unfailing kindness of the Chinese, the-diet of rice never seemed to satisfy us, and often after a fairly large meal we would go a mile or so, see a likely house, and someone—usually Dick or Jack—would say, “How about we see what this chap’s having for lunch today?”

After dark we came back to the main road and pushed on, but there was a lot of Japanese traffic that night and we were continually having to dash into shelter on the side of the road.

Fortunately, the Japanese drove with blazing headlights. As we neared Yong Peng we were increasingly worried by signs of Japanese occupation, and we decided to by-pass the town and work our way around the outskirts. It was far too dark to see in the rubber, so we slept until daybreak and then pushed on further away from the road.

After working round the edge of a swamp for hours, we were famished and I went to a large house on the edge of the rubber to ask for "mukan." The house appeared to be deserted, but in view of the Japanese in Yong Peng I thought it wise to look around, and it was just as well I did. The outer rooms were empty, and I tiptoed across to the bedroom, and kicked open the door. My heart jumped. Facing me on the other side of dim room was a villainous, muddy figure with wild eyes. His big black revolver was pointed at my navel. Wild thoughts raced through my mind like leaves caught in an autumn gust. What was I to do?

But there was something hauntingly familiar in that low forehead, the receding chin, and those piggy eyes, and fortunately before I could surrender, I recognized my reflection in a full-length mirror, and my heart resumed its normal beat.

But when I looked for a little sympathy, Dick oafishly remarked. "Well, you frighten me *all* the time," and Jack said—not for the first time—"Fair dinkum, how *did* you ever get three stripes?"

"Talent," I told him loftily and ignored his low-bred guffaws.

Obviously there was no hope of getting food in this house, so we tried our luck at the next prosperous-looking dwelling. A young Chinese became quite agitated at our appearance and hustled us into the jungle. "Stay here, don't move and don't talk," he warned us urgently. Half an hour later he returned with a broad smile and a plate of steaming flapjacks.

"My goodness," he said pulling a face, "as you come to my house from the front there are Jepun soldiers at the back door asking for vegetables. Now they are gone and I take you to a safe place."

He took us to a bamboo hideout in the jungle which the Chinese had built to shelter their women and children during the fighting in the district. He listened carefully to our plans, then said with a broad smile, "Now you must all have a good rest and

more food. Then I shall put you on the right track. Last night we have helped sixteen of your friends to cross the Yong Peng river in a sampan." This was most likely Mick Gibbons and his party, we thought.

He also brought with him a grave, older looking Chinese whom he introduced as "Brother," and, quite diffidently, he asked if we would allow the Brother to pray for us. We were happy to say that nothing would please us more and, that evening before we left, the six of us knelt on the earth floor and took part in a most impressive and sincere service while the Brother offered prayers on our behalf. To what God he prayed we knew not, for he prayed in Chinese, but there was no disputing his sincerity and devotion. In this dim hut half hidden in the jungle, we knelt with two strangers whom we should never meet again, and I felt that here, in its simplest and truest form, was the Brotherhood of Man.

We left that evening and spent the night with another Chinese who lived by the river. We were up at half-past four, because by this time the Japanese had commandeered all boats and sampans in the area, and we knew we were going to have to swim. All we lost in the difficult crossing were a boot and a bayonet. Fortunately the boot floated upright, and persistent diving and probing of the muddy bottom eventually located the bayonet. But the swimming and diving had taken nearly two hours; mercifully it was not until the next day that we were told this was one of the most crocodile-infested streams in all Johore.

A study of the crude map indicated that the best plan would be to make for the fishing village of Parit Sulong, along a track that led through the little village of Pasir. At the next house we stopped for a drink and asked the Chinese owner to show us this track. On the mention of Pasir he became very agitated and tried desperately to tell us something about it but, as he spoke no English or Malay, we had no idea what he was so alarmed about. It was only when we really insisted that he reluctantly showed us the track, and even then came running alongside us for more than a mile until his old legs gave out. As we left him he was still trying to persuade us to turn back.

Five miles further on, the track suddenly forked and there was no indication which track led to Pasir. Our map was of no help, and I went to a near-by house for directions. A Chinese boy of

about eleven came to the door.

"Hullo, Joe," I greeted him, "We are British soldiers trying to get to the sea. Can you show us the track to Pasir?"

The Chinese boy's slant eyes widened. "I am Ming, tuan, and I will help. But Pasir is Japanese mining town. Many Japanese are there even before the war comes." Then as I stood gaping, he said with the utmost self-possession, "Wait here, tuan. I will tell my father and take you to friends."

Ming led us through jungle tracks to a hut, where once again we met Mick Gibbons and his 2/29th band. Mick told us that the Chinese were most anxious for them to stay as there were widespread rumours that 300,000 Americans had landed at Penang and were advancing on Singapore. None of us believed that this was true and the infantry boys, who were impatient of delay, left that night with the bloodcurdling plan of rushing the public ferry at Batu Pahat, a large Japanese-occupied town, and sailing the ferry to Australia. Before they had a chance to put this suicidal scheme into practice, they blundered into members of a Chinese organization which was smuggling people across to the west coast of Sumatra. There they were being picked up by British ships and taken to India, so within a matter of weeks, Mick and his men were back in Australia.

So there it was. Four groups and four entirely different fates. Mick Gibbons and Co to escape to Australia; McCure and the guerrillas to stagnate in the jungle for almost four years; Freddie Peake and his party to vanish quietly from this world; and we pushing on to keep our appointment with friend Nippon.

Kismet? Chance? Who knows. We follow our stars and hope.

We, too, were anxious to push off before the Japanese became well organized, but George, who had been troubled with malaria all along, was now seriously ill, and we had no option but to stay. During the next few days we had many visits from the local Chinese. They were wonderful people, and gave what they had to give freely. Making conversation one afternoon I mentioned we had taken a bath that day. Our friends misunderstood my remark, and that night we were dragged from our warm beds by three smiling Chinese, who walked us four miles to a pool and then indicated that here was the bath we had requested. They solemnly explained that we had to travel by night, otherwise we

would be seen by the local Japanese garrison. However, the wind was cold and the mosquitoes were active, so our cautious friends lit a huge fire and threw heap after heap of dry branches on it until we had a roaring blaze that we felt could have been seen in Singapore.

But the Lion City had troubles of its own that night. In fact it was experiencing one of the most bitter moments in its long history. It was 15 February 1942. Earlier that day the free world had heard with dismay that Singapore had surrendered. Of course we did not know this at the time, although it probably explains how we got away with such a foolhardy thing as a king-size fire. If the Japanese saw it, they probably thought it was a victory celebration.

So we waited and hoped, but George did not improve, and each day found him weaker and more gaunt. Ming came regularly with food, but he never volunteered any news, and we knew that the war must be going badly for us. I liked Ming; he was a delightful mixture of respect and mischief.

The boredom of inactivity was becoming unbearable. One day I asked Ming, “Do you think you could get us some books to read?”

Ming nodded. “Yes, Sergeant, but is there here someone who can read?” and he was gone before we could reply. A few hours later he came back and triumphantly handed over two books. One was an English-Chinese Dictionary, and the other was Volume II of *Metallurgy*. Just the stuff for a little light reading. After that we diverted ourselves by playing cards, or watching the big baboons among the rubber trees on the edge of the jungle.

Four days passed and George continued to sink. Then Ming came with an unusually serious face.

“My father say that Jepun have left Yong Peng,” he said. “My father also say that Jepun is searching with bloodhounds for the soldiers who hide in the jungle. My father say that this is good time for your party to walk to the sea.”

We thought so too, but what could we do with George?

“Our friend is far too sick to walk,” I told Ming, “Can you get a bicycle for him?”

Ming looked embarrassed. “This is very difficult, Sergeant. Jepun has taken most bicycles and those that are left cost much

money.”

I handed over the last of the Japanese 10-dollar bills which I had taken from the tanks. It was quite a relief to get rid of them; they would have taken a little explaining if we had been captured. Besides, the thought of the Japanese helping to finance our escape appealed to me.

Ming returned that afternoon, his dark eyes gleaming with pleasure.

“See, Sergeant. I have bought you a bicycle,” he said proudly.

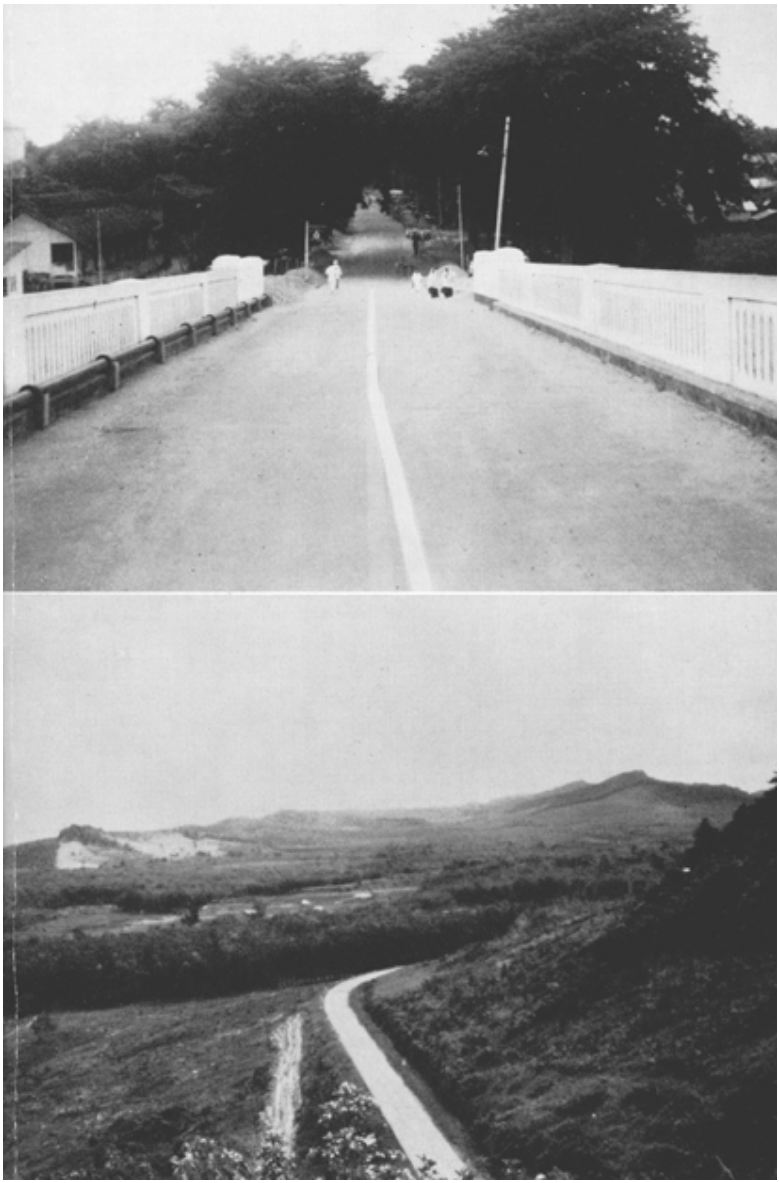
There was a snort of laughter from Dick, and I was hard put to it to keep a straight face myself; the bicycle that Ming had bought for us was showing its years sadly. It had no brakes and no front tyre or tube. Many of the spokes were missing and others whirred happily against the front forks when the wheel was turned. But it was a bicycle, and a means of getting George to the coast, and we thanked Ming warmly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WE DECIDED TO go straight up the main road to Bakri, where we had been fighting so bitterly a few weeks earlier, and from there take the road to the coast. This would mean a fifty-mile journey which would have to be made at night. George's condition made it impossible to contemplate struggling through the swamps and the jungle.

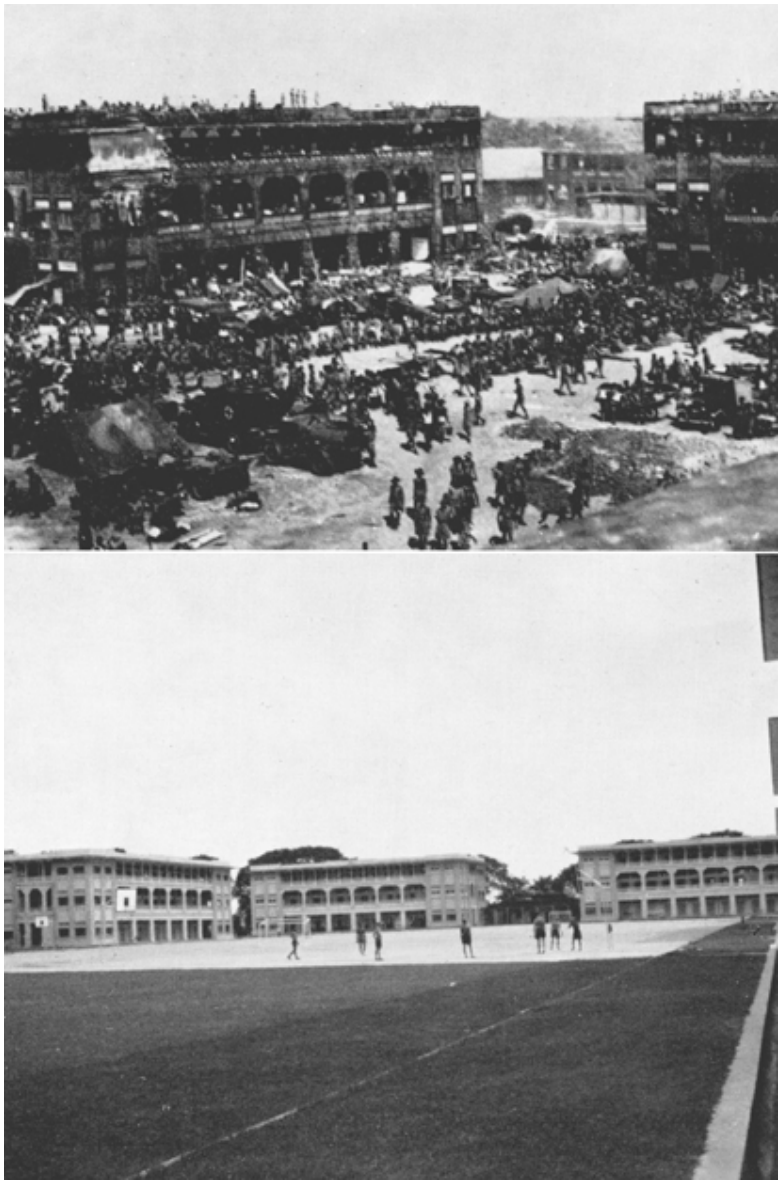
We reached our road about midnight, and listened for sounds of activity, but there appeared to be none, so we set off. We had tied a strap to each of the back forks of the bike and, with a man pulling on each strap and another walking by the handlebars to steer, we got along very well.

The road was littered with wrecked trucks and burnt-out carriers. In many of them the bodies lay or sat where they had died. In the course of their retreat the British had blown every bridge, so the Japanese had had to erect temporary wooden bridges. Usually there was a sentry box at one end. The sentry boxes brought me many an anxious moment. I was the only one in the party with a pair of rubber shoes (a gift from the Chinese Communists), and the only one with a weapon, so I usually did most of the scouting.



Parit Sulong Bridge, taken from the position occupied by the Japanese.

On the right of the road is the mountain, Bukit Belah, where we camped for the nights and found the corpses that bore witness to a tragic mistake—the battle between the Indian and Norfolk regiments.



Selarang Barracks Square, September 1942.

Selarang Barracks Square, Changi.

Just before dawn we heard a frightful outcry ahead of us. I crept up to the house, convinced that a Japanese must be beating up one of the natives. As I drew close to the house there seemed

to be something vaguely familiar about the bellowing. Sure enough, when I cautiously peered through the window I saw a Hindustani kneeling at prayer on his mat. Apparently he was taking no chances that Vishnu or Siva might not hear him.

On waking at first light the next morning we were surprised to find ourselves on the edge of a network of trenches which covered the face of the mountain. An examination of the litter of army papers, haversacks, rifle clips, and webbing equipment revealed that we were on the site from which the Sixth Norfolk Regiment had fought.

At eight o'clock I left the others and went in search of food and medicine for George. From the top of the mountain there was a magnificent view over twenty miles of jungle to the coast, and for a while I just sat there enjoying the sunshine and the singing of the birds. A slight breeze sprang up, bringing with it a familiar, sickly-sweet odour. I went to investigate and came upon the bodies of dozens of soldiers just inside the trees. They were black and unrecognizable, but the battle dress and the turbans showed them to be British and Indian troops. As I walked among the corpses, a few wild pigs scurried into the jungle, and an old man baboon went grunting and crashing through the trees above. It was only too easy to guess what they had been doing.

There were letters and photos strewn about. I picked up the photo of a pretty girl; on the back she had written, "Darling, when you climb your last hill, come home to your loving Margaret." An unfinished letter began, "My dear wife, as I look out over this beautiful, peaceful country my thoughts are of you. ..."

Much later we learnt what had happened on this lonely mountain called Bukit Belah. Unknown to each other the Sixth Norfolks and the 3/l6th Punjab Regiment had each taken up positions on Bukit Belah. Just before dawn the Punjabis had attacked the Norfolks, believing them to be Japanese troops. The confusion was just being sorted out when the Japanese made a savage attack on them both and they suffered heavy loss of life.

The Japanese had ransacked the place thoroughly, but I did find a priceless bottle of aspirin. The tablets reduced George's fever almost immediately, and we were able to move on the same night.

Often I would scout ahead, and I never ceased to be appalled at how far the noise of Dick's and Jack's army boots and the iron rim of the front tyre carried. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that we could be heard for miles. Fortunately we sounded for all the world like one of the innumerable Malay bullock carts—not that we ever saw one in our nocturnal wanderings. The Japanese imposed a strict curfew, and the average Malay or Chinese found it very wise to mind his own business at this time. Still, it was eerie to travel for hours up a main road making quite a lot of noise, but never meeting a soul.

As we approached Parit Sulong there were many signs of heavy fighting. I went on to investigate, and was surprised at the extent of the damage done to the outskirts of the village. It was a bright moonlit night, and the concrete bridge, which was still intact, had a large and sinister sentry box at the far end. There was no way of getting around it, and most reluctantly I walked up very slowly with the revolver hidden against my leg. I was tensed to fire, and dive into the river if a sentry appeared.

The sentry box was empty, praise Allah, and I expelled a long breath in pure relief. There were several shell craters on the bridge, and, unbelievably, when I examined them in the moonlight, they appeared to have been filled in with human bodies. Even more incredible, this turned out to be a fact.

Much of the village had been flattened or smashed and the stench of death was overpowering. I tiptoed down the centre of the road through the darkened village and the swish, swish, of the water in my bottle was the only sound to disturb the deathly silence. A tomb could not have been more hushed. Something about the place worried me strangely and I had the impression of eyes watching from the dark shops by the road side. Still, there was nothing to be seen so I went back and at four in the morning we trundled over the bridge and through the village. There was an atmosphere here that made us uneasy.

It was much later that we learnt the sad story of Parit Sulong and understood why we should have been so affected. It was to this village that the 2/19th and the remnants of the 2/29th had been driven in their retreat from Bakri. Some of the most gripping fighting of the war had taken place here, but the Australians had been unable to dislodge the Japanese who held

the bridge. Finally, after days of holding off the Imperial Guards against ridiculous odds, the main body had broken through the Japanese lines to safety.

Behind them they left a hundred and ten Australian and thirty-five Indian soldiers, all badly wounded and all protected by the Red Cross. The Japanese, enraged by the escape of the main party, tied the wounded men together and then massacred them. Petrol was then poured over the prisoners —many of whom were still alive—and they were set alight. Two men survived this massacre and lived as witnesses to this horror.

The next night we lay up in a Malay house. It was one of the better kind, and we had our best sleep for weeks on really soft beds. The sun shining through the bedroom window and a rooster crowing in the yard woke us at seven, and Dick poked a tousled head out of the window, only to pull back in alarm.

"Don't come and look, but there are bloody *millions* of Japanese driving past our front gate," he said, rather white-faced. At that moment, an oily Malay walked into the room. As he opened his mouth to say something, I pointed the revolver at his ample stomach, and without a second's hesitation he disappeared as quickly as he had come.

As we left, Dick grinned at Jack. "Ever do any chicken stealing at Cohuna?" Jack laughed. "No, A bit of cow rustling, but never chickens. Why?" "Stick with me," boasted Dick. "To a Voege, a crowing rooster means one thing, and one thing only—roast chicken. I'll show you a master at work tonight."

Fortune favoured us that day; we stumbled on a pineapple plantation a mile back from the road, and our problem of how to spend the day was solved. Later in the afternoon an old Chinese gentleman stumbled on us as we sat bloated in the plantation, and took us back to his house where he plied us with coconut juice, biscuits, and dried fish.

By midnight we had safely crossed the mist-covered swamps and were into hilly country, where we had to take things more quietly. George was much stronger now, and several times we let him get off the bike and walk a short distance. We were all pretty exhausted from dragging our heavy load up the hills, but we dared not stop for more than fifteen minutes at a time, in case our muscles became so stiff that we could not move.

We decided to make Bakri before dawn. By three o'clock we were beginning to see familiar signs along the way, and by four we were in Bakri. There was a light shining near the crossroads. I was tired and hungry, and said impulsively, "Come on, let's go straight through."

"Hell, no. Look at that light," Dick protested vigorously.

"It's only some old Chinaman who can't sleep," I answered, "Let's push on."

But Jack, too, was cautious. "No, I reckon we ought to have a look first. It could be anything."

The poor food and the strain had affected my nerves, and it was with very bad grace that I went ahead to investigate.

I crept up in the shadows, and was disconcerted to see a military truck parked outside the shop with the light. As I approached, a man left the truck and, humming softly to himself, went into the shop. Very cautiously, I moved forward until I could see inside. There were eight or nine figures sleeping on the floor, with tin hats and military belts hanging above their heads. From one belt there dangled a small doll. This was conclusive enough for me, and mentally apologizing to Dick and Jack, I set off to find a way of avoiding the village.

As far as could be seen there was nothing but swamp all round, and I returned to the group very worried. We agreed that we'd have to try to get past the shop without being seen.

"Okay," I said. "We'll go one at a time and meet on top of the hill just out of the village. I'll go first; if I get by all right George can follow in five minutes, then you Jack, and if all is well by then Dick can try to get through with the bike. See you on the hill."

I tiptoed up the road hugging the shadows, sidled round the corner, and hurried along to the rendezvous point, from where I had a good view of the crossroads.

George was the problem. Sometimes during the last few nights he had seemed to be in a coma. At other times he would rally and protest feebly, "Leave me be; you'll never make it with me. Leave me, and I'll give myself up," to which Jack usually replied, "Poor chap's delirious again," and Dick would laugh and say, "I wouldn't leave you for quids, you old wog; you're going to show

me how to grow oranges in Mildura."

Now everything depended on how George got on.

A dog had picked up our scent and was barking with irritating persistence. Five minutes went by. Then George made his attempt, but as he reached the corner he was seen. There were shouts of alarm, and the shop became a hive of activity. Lights went on, torches flashed, and the crack of rifle fire seemed to come from all directions. There must have been patrols on the alert, for just as George reached the almost identical site where our gun had stood six weeks before, a hail of rifle and machine-gun fire broke out on both sides of Bakri. It was eerie. One almost felt that time had stood still, and that the battle of Muar was still being fought.

George never hesitated. He was much too weak to run, but he kept coming up the hill at a funny little jog trot, and as he passed I grabbed him and pulled him into the shelter of the trees. Machine-gun fire was now coming from the village itself, and we could hear shouts of alarm from the position where we had left Dick and Jack. George and I looked at each other gloomily.

"Bugger, bugger, bugger," I said unhappily. "Sounds as if the Japs have got Dick and Jack."

George, still breathing heavily from his exertions, morosely agreed.

"Let's wait here till half-past five," I suggested. "That will give us just on half an hour to get away before daylight."

George nodded, and we waited with sinking hearts. I cursed myself for going first, and mentally tried to decide which had been the bigger risk—going first past the shop, or going last? Had I unconsciously selected the less dangerous way? It is a sad commentary on human nature that, in the middle of this soul-searching, part of me was sorrowing for the loss of the rooster and the two pullets we had stolen a couple of days previously, and had left tied to the bike.

Just as we were beginning to dread having to make the decision to leave, our hearts leaped to see two mud-spattered figures coming through the trees, carrying—my joy was complete—the rooster and the two plump pullets.

"Gosh, are you ever a sight for sore eyes," I greeted them. "We

thought you'd had it."

"Stop frisking round like a puppy," Dick grinned through the mud that caked his face. "Well, it was close enough, that's for sure. When George stirred things up, we just lay low until a party of Japs came down the road with machine-guns. Then we grabbed the birds, dumped the bike, and hit the swamp."

"Yes," Jack interrupted. "We were lucky. It was mud and water up to the waist most of the time, but luckily for us that dog kept barking and we used him as a compass. Otherwise we'd still be in there going round in circles."

"The funny part about it," said Dick, "was that we both distinctly heard men groaning in the swamp. Must have been at least four or five of them. We knew it couldn't be either of you wogs, and it was hopeless to look for them in the dark so we pushed on. Wonder who it was?"

We have often asked ourselves that question and wondered if perhaps it could have been Freddie Peake and his party. Almost certainly we shall never know.

We pushed on down the road as fast as George could walk. Gradually the sound of gunfire receded, and at first light we left the road and entered the shelter of a rubber plantation.

That evening we called at a large Chinese house for food, and were showered with the usual open-hearted hospitality and kindness. More and more Chinese arrived, more and more food and drink was forced on us, and finally the gathering turned into a full-scale party with four thin, scruffy Australian soldiers as the guests of honour. Eventually we tore ourselves away and settled down in some bushes for a short sleep before moving off. But the hospitality, on top of the previous night's exertion, proved too much, and the sun was shining in our faces long before we awoke.

We set off towards the coast in daylight, and late that afternoon we found we had to cross the main road. It was jammed with vehicles of all sorts. We observed from cover for a while, decided that it was all Malay and Chinese traffic, and strolled across very casually, so as not to give the impression of hunted fugitives. Nevertheless, we caused a sensation; crowds formed round us hanging on our every word. Many probably thought that we were the first of the American or Chungking

forces who were rumoured to be invading Malaya every second day. There were many Chinese girls passing on bicycles, and it was a strangely unsettling exerience to receive a smile from a pretty girl again.

A prosperous-looking Chinese walked along beside us as we went through the village.

“What are your plans?” he asked. “I may be able to help.”

We told him that our plan now was to sail to Sumatra, cross it by foot, steal a boat on the west coast, and then sail to India. We were fairly sure by this time that Singapore had fallen.

He looked aghast. “Why don’t you give yourself up to the Japanese?”

Dick replied with a straight face, “We can’t stand Tojo.”

Our Chinese friend looked puzzled, so Dick added with a grin, “Apart from that, they’ll shoot us.”

“Oh, no,” our friend said, “They won’t do that.” His assurance was cheering. But we had come too far now not to attempt to see our plan through.

We camped for the night in a fisherman’s hut; the next stage of our journey was about to begin. The sea was all about us, and we could smell the salt air and hear the waves as we settled down to sleep.

But next morning we were bitterly disappointed to find that the whole coastline, as far as one could see, was fringed by soft mangrove swamp; there was not a boat in sight. We decided to move further south that night to see if we could get out of the swampy area, and set off down the coast road which ran parallel to the Straits of Malacca. George was almost his old self and we made steady progress, but we were uneasy about the number of people still around. There had been no fighting in this area and apparently there was no curfew.

A Malay on a bike passed, flashing a torch about, and although we crouched on the side of the road we were sure that he had seen us. A little while later he came riding back from the direction in which we were travelling, still shining the torch. This time we did not bother to hide, and I waved the revolver at him and uttered a few terse Malay phrases. He rode off quickly enough, but the damage had been done and the snare was set.

A few minutes later we passed through the village of Parit Jawa, and I was just congratulating myself on having got safely through this disturbed area, when we came upon the Parit Jawa Police Station. We were walking along the edge of the road in single file. I was in front, and as we drew abreast of the station I glanced up at the veranda set back from the fence, and my heart pounded as I noticed the momentary glow of a cigarette in the shadows. I just had time to discern the faint outline of a small, peaked cap.

There was nothing to do but keep going and I didn't even have time to warn the others before a loud challenge shattered the peace. We made no reply, but we instinctively quickened our pace.

Another loud challenge came almost immediately and this also was met with a dignified silence. Then the sound of rifle bolts clicking home galvanized me into abrupt activity, and dignity forgotten, I galloped down the road towards Singapore. Then came a third unnecessarily loud challenge (at least they were gentlemen), and shots began to fly around our quivering bodies. We later estimated that there were seven or eight men firing. As soon as the shooting started I changed into top and rocketed down the highway. Once again Harrison, the leader of men, was leading the retreat in peerless style.

However, I felt no shame whatever to be running, for had I not read somewhere that we are all but actors in a play and take the part given to us by the Great Director. Given my own choice in the matter, I rather felt that I would have been back there shooting it out to the end. As it was, there was here no weakness, no fateful indecision. I was motivated by one single-minded purpose—outpace those bullets.

I could hear Jack McGlone thudding along in a hopeless endeavour to keep at my heels and I naturally concluded that Dick and George would also be somewhere at the back of the field, guarding their gallant leader's rear.

Alas for human frailties. Next second a searing pain in the left ankle told me that my men had failed in their duty and that I was about to shed my blood for Das Faderland. My first reaction to this signal honour was to emit a shrill yelp of hurt surprise and disbelief, and to settle down to show these barbarians what real

speed meant. I shot down the road like a paper bag in a typhoon.

I veered off, and plunged into the bushes; seconds later Jack crashed down beside me. By this time, I was so nervous and over-excited that I almost shot him by mistake. We waited tensely for a few minutes, but there was no pursuit.

Half an hour later, Dick and George came strolling down the road, discussing, of all things, orange-growing in Mildura.… They had reacted to the firing like well-trained soldiers, and had simply flattened themselves till it was over.

We walked on for a few miles before going into cover to inspect my wound. The bullet had made a clean hole and, although it had obviously turned on the ankle bone, it had not shattered it.

"Let's sleep here and see how you feel in the morning," George suggested. I doubt whether any of us slept very well that night.

Next morning my ankle had stiffened badly, and after a few painful attempts to walk I accepted the inevitable.

"I've had it," I announced, not without a gratifying sense of heroism. "You chaps shove off and I'll give myself up sometime this afternoon."

The others made a few noncommittal remarks, then held a short conference out of my hearing. When they came back George said casually, "We've decided to go in the bag with you in case you get lost, or something."

"Don't be stupid." I was emphatic. "You chaps are fit and you could be in Sumatra this time tomorrow. You're sure to get a boat further down the coast."

"Yes, I suppose we should leave you," George said dryly, "like you left me when I had fever."

"That was different," I replied feebly.

"Ah, pipe down, you little wog," Dick joined the argument. "The Japs might shoot a wog like you out of kindness to the human race, but they wouldn't dare shoot three upstanding Anzacs like us."

Jack summed up dogmatically: "As far as I'm concerned it's one in, all in," and with that they seemed to consider the matter settled. It was useless to argue, and one part of me was relieved to give in. Obviously it was a terrible gamble. We hoped that

although the Japanese could kill one man without turning a hair, they might think twice before executing four.

Accordingly we tore up all our maps, ate our remaining food, and buried our letters and the revolver. The revolver was a weight off my mind; I had known all along that if I'd been caught with that and the soft-nosed slugs, I wouldn't have had a chance.

We drank a toast to ourselves with the last of the whisky, and, as on a night before action, shook hands all round.

"Ready?" asked George, and we made our way out on to the road which I reached, literally and symbolically, on hands and knees, vomiting merrily along the way. There we waited for a Japanese party to come and discover the magnificent prize that the fortunes of war had brought them.

It was the last day of February 1942, and it was a glorious moment in the history of the South-East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Pudu Prison Kuala Lumpur

CHAPTER NINE

IRONICALLY ENOUGH, AFTER nearly two months of twisting and turning to keep out of the clutches of Nippon, our efforts to change our status to that of prisoners of war were quite an anti-climax. We waited by the roadside for more than half an hour while dozens of vehicles whizzed by, but all were driven by Chinese or Malays who had no desire to invite trouble by picking up soldiers of any description. After a while, a curious crowd of Malays gathered around us; they were obviously surprised to see white men openly waiting by the side of a main road. Several of them, by significantly drawing their hands across their throats, indicated that disaster would swiftly overtake us unless we went back to the jungle. Others were more helpful and cut down a few coconuts so that we could drink the milk.

When at last a Japanese staff car did pass, we were so completely surrounded by Malays that the car went on a few hundred yards before curiosity brought its occupants back. The car stopped, and three Japanese officers, all wearing swords, came towards us. The boys stood with upraised hands. It was a critical moment.

The Japanese conferred among themselves for what seemed ages, and then, to our great relief, motioned us into the car.

The three officers were unusually tall and slim for Japanese and, in their well-cut, olive uniforms with a white shirt worn over the open collar, they looked most impressive. They spoke hardly any English, and apart from asking if we carried any weapons showed little interest in us, although they were very courteous. My heart sank as I observed them; winning the war would be a tremendous task if these were typical Japanese. Later, when we got to know the Japanese soldier better, we realized that our three officers—fortunately for us and for the Allies—were exceptional. Often small groups that came out of the jungle to surrender were butchered on the spot.

In fairness it must be added that in our own Army we had the occasional loudmouth who boasted that “I’ll never take any of the yellow bastards as prisoners!” It must also be added that these heroes were invariably useless in action and the first to throw their hands hopefully into the air.

At Batu Pahat we were handed over to the local troops and made our first acquaintance with the stocky little men who were to become so familiar and so detestable to us in the next three and a half years. At first sight one was inclined to wonder incredulously how these short monkey-like men in the shoddy uniforms had performed so magnificently against us. But closer inspection showed their bow legged frames to be sturdy and powerful, and their equipment—including their split-toed rubber shoes—to be far better fitted for jungle warfare than our own. We were also to learn that, whatever their other faults, their discipline and fighting spirit were completely magnificent.

Dick Voege was unwise enough to wear his watch during the handover, and it was rudely taken from him by a grinning Japanese private who was in such a hurry to get it that he cut the band with a sharp knife. Dick had an anxious moment when he first saw the Son of Heaven advancing on him with a large knife, and was almost relieved to lose only his watch.

At the local jail our arrival was greeted with cheers from the mixed batch of English and Australian soldiers in the cells. Conditions here were grim; the Japanese would clear the jail only when they had twenty or more prisoners. We brought the number to twenty exactly.

Next day an open truck arrived, we took our places in the back, and set off on a two hundred-mile journey to Kuala Lumpur.

A heart-wrenching moment came at Tampin when our truck pulled up opposite the padang. The tennis court where Ken Daniel and I had played so often was now overgrown with weeds and served as a parking area for military trucks. Opposite us was the lush, green padang where we had spent happy hours at cricket and regimental sports, and beyond that again could be seen the Rest House where so often after tennis we had sipped long cooling drinks while Quong, the Chinese house boy, prepared a leisurely meal.

This had usually been followed by an evening of drinking and

talking while the local Indian doctor mixed us exotic—and semi-lethal—concoctions. Finally we would stroll down the hibiscus and orchid-fringed lane to our quiet camp, peaceful at this time of night under the clear Malayan stars. Now, alas, the Indian doctor was said to have been shot as a spy, and I lay hot and feverish in the midday sun.

We reached Kuala Lumpur on the evening of the second day, and were taken to the local civilian jail, Pudu Prison, which was now being used as a P.O.W. camp. My memories of this period are hazy; the effects of the last few months had caught up with me. We had been through two nerve-racking actions, tramped over half Johore, pulled George forty miles on a solid-tyred bike, and I had been potted in the ankle into the bargain. On top of this it was ages since we had eaten a proper meal. My wound was now four days old and had not been treated in any way. I had not even been able to take off my rubber shoes and my socks, let alone wash the wound.

I was carried into Pudu, where the medical orderlies examined my foot, which was swollen to such a size that shoe and sock had to be cut off. I mourned the loss of those valuable items; it was ten weeks before I possessed a pair of socks again. The first weeks in Pudu were far from pleasant ones; for many days I seemed to be on the deck of a ship moored in a jungle river. I could feel the sun beating down, and I could hear the monkeys chattering as they played in the overhanging branches or frolicked round me. Then one day I recognized the chattering as human speech, and the monkeys became medical orderlies gazing down at me pessimistically as I lay on my stretcher on the floor.

The sick were on the floor of what had been the jail office; the sun shone fiercely through the barred windows. The jail was fantastically crowded, and one had to be in a pretty desperate condition before being admitted to this so-called hospital; indeed, in the early days, I think I was the only one who survived. The diet was heavily limed rice which our inexperienced cooks always managed to make gluey. To wash it down there was a weak and unnourishing stew made from meat that had definitely gone off. Such things as salt, milk, sugar, bread, and fruit we never saw, and consequently every patient, regardless of his original complaint, quickly went down with dysentery. There were very

few orderlies, and they were inexperienced, and their equipment primitive. The floor was foul, the stench terrible; and the place was infested with flies. It was not so much a hospital as a place in which to die.

Of necessity, one grew hardened. I recall one morning trying to force down the evil-smelling, saltless, claggy rice when the man next to me gave an awful wheeze and a gurgle, and died. I turned on my right side and ate with my left hand, only to hear a rattle from the stretcher on the right. I brushed away the flies and went on eating.…

As soon as the fever abated and my ankle was free from infection I was given a crude walking-stick and sent to join the main body of prisoners. Things were so bad that once I knew that I was soon to leave the hospital, I had no compunction whatever in taking the boots of the first size seven man to die alongside me. Although I felt uncomfortably like a vulture, I stifled any pangs of conscience with the thought that I should not have minded in the least had the positions been reversed.

Conditions in the jail proper were completely chaotic, for the Japanese had utilized only a fraction of the available space. During the day more than seven hundred men were crammed into what in peacetime had been an exercise yard for thirty female prisoners. At night we slept on the bare floor of a veranda that ran around the first floor of a cell block, in the few cells themselves, and even on the stairs that led to the tiny court where the latrines were situated.

At night we were far too tightly packed to leave any form of passageway, and, as our rice diet had a high water content and most of us had dysentery in any case, every man was up four or five times a night. This involved stumbling over the packed, sweating bodies on the veranda floor and down the twenty-odd steps to the courtyard, asking permission from the guard, “Benjo-ka, Okay?” and making for the boxes built over the two shallow holes in the centre of the courtyard. Rainy nights, when water filled the trenches and forced the maggots up on to the seats, were a horror.

As I lay on the floor, my semi-healed ankle was constantly being stepped on, and I came to dread the moonless nights. I tried sleeping with my head to the centre, but the smell of unwashed

feet was unbearable. They were unforgettable, hideous, restless nights.

Eventually the Japanese opened another section of the jail and moved us into cell blocks shaped like a Y. The A.I.F. were in one arm, Asiatic and civilian prisoners occupied the other, and the British troops moved into the stem. With only three men to each cell, living here was comparatively luxurious. Each cell had a concrete slab three feet by seven feet about eighteen inches off the floor and, because of my ankle, I had this, and George and Dick shared the floor. For six months I slept on this slab, with a thin rubber cape my only article of bedding, and I slept like a baby.

Our lack of possessions would have appalled a Trappist monk. Every P.O.W. in Pudu had either been captured in battle, or like us had been picked up behind the lines while trying to escape. Unlike our comrades in Singapore who were usually taken with their equipment either intact or accessible, we had what we stood in and little else. I was perhaps average, and my worldly goods consisted of one pair of shorts, one shirt, one invaluable gas cape, a tin dixie, and a spoon. At least there were no storage problems.

At this stage the Japanese were taking daily working parties from the camp; these expeditions were welcomed by the fit P.O.W.s as a chance to steal food or clothing. My ankle, of course, prevented me from going out, so I ate badly. The unchanging diet was grey, sticky rice three times a day. Twice a day there was a cupful of meat broth as an appetizer. Vegetables were scarce and the meat in the Kuala Lumpur Cool Stores was going bad as the British had turned off all the power before evacuating the town. Each day the medical orderlies examined the meat supplied by the Japanese and decided which pockets could be cut out and eaten with safety. I imagine no old Puduite will forget the gloom and dismay that fell on the camp when the news flashed round that “the meat’s been condemned again.” As far as the Japanese Quartermaster was concerned, he was carrying out his duty by delivering a carcass a day, and the fact that it was invariably putrid, well—tid’apa, as the Malays say. No matter.…

Our chief concern was to get hold of things to flavour the rice. Anyone with a few dollars could buy such delicacies as coconuts, whitebait, shrimp paste, etc., outside the camp and bring it back

into the jail at night. The really wealthy could sometimes procure a tin of jam or condensed milk—almost unheard-of luxuries. Rations issued by the Japanese were never generous at the best of times. The sick, of course, always had enough food, but at the expense of the working men, whose rations were cut down. As a result, food became the focal point of our lives, and was the absorbing subject of our conversations, thoughts, and dreams. And the dreadful irony was that while fit men could never get enough of a diet that was ninety-five per cent rice, it was almost impossible for a sick man to force down, and keep down, the unappetizing mess that was slopped into a rusty dixie.

Many a weak and feverish P.O.W. was to die simply because he could not eat his rice. One of our medical officers later coined the phrase, "Your ticket home is at the bottom of your dixie." And it was true. While you kept eating there was always a chance. But a man with a temperature that tops the century and who is straining his life away with thirty and forty griping bowel movements a day is not always the most logical of thinkers. And it was hard to convince a man who dry-retches at the mere sight and smell of the rice that he *must* eat, even if he vomits most of it on the spot.

A second spectre that visited us during Pudu days was a complaint known as "Happy Feet." For some inexplicable reason only half the men were affected by this searing stabbing in the soles of the feet. Massaging brought only temporary relief, and the touch of even the lightest covering brought a scream of pain. The only sure relief was walking.

Often at night I would stir on my concrete slab and sleepily note the haggard figures trudging wearily past the cell door, and as I dozed off, hear the never ending clop clop of their wooden clogs on the concrete floor. All night up and down, round and round, with searing pain waiting to stab the moment they stopped.

But by far the most serious thing we had to cope with was the lack of vitamins in our diet. This led to beriberi, scabies, blindness, and innumerable other diseases. The first sign of vitamin deficiency was an affliction known among the P.O.W.s as "rice balls," this being the name of a dish the Japanese most often favoured.

However, the ironical name “rice balls” arose from the fact that the vitamin-lacking diet so abruptly forced upon us had endowed one and all with raw and weeping scrotum and genitals. Chafing worsened the complaint, and caused the skin on the inner thighs and genital organs to split and become raw. Vitamins, ointment, even the rice polishings thrown away by the Japanese each day, could soon have rid us of this weeping, sticky scourge. Instead, because of the complete indifference shown by our masters, we were to live with this condition for years. Its name was descriptive; its effects were both painful and humiliating.

CHAPTER TEN

BUT IF WE WERE short of food and vitamins in Pudu, we were rich in conversation, for Pudu was a paradise of exciting stories. Every man in the jail had been taken behind the enemy lines; some were Malay Volunteers who had stayed behind as guerrillas; others were from the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force.

There was the medical orderly who had treated an Englishman who had had the lower half of his face shot away and whose tongue had to be stitched to his shirt with needle and thread to prevent it getting back down his throat and choking him. Mercifully perhaps, he was executed by the Japanese.

A tragic figure in the jail was young Jimmy Wharton. Jim had been among the wounded left at Parit Sulong and with the others had been tied up, machine-gunned, and bayoneted. Neither Jimmy nor his mate, to whom he was tied, were more than wounded and Jimmy lay across his friend whispering urgently, "Don't move, don't move." But the boy was in agony and groaned and writhed until the Japanese noticed him and pushed Jimmy off him into a deep storm water drain and riddled his friend with machine-gun fire.

Jim Wharton spent hours hidden in the reeds in the water and with sick eyes saw the one hundred and thirty-four men machine-gunned, bayoneted, drenched with petrol, and set alight. He heard the screams, pleas, and curses of those who still lived when they smelt the petrol and realized the fate to come. He saw, too, the trucks driven back and forth over the bodies at the end. (No wonder that the holes on the Parit Sulong bridge had appeared to have been filled with bodies.)

He stayed, too weak from loss of blood to move, until the Japanese marched singing and exhilarated out of Parit Sulong. He stayed, shocked, until the creatures of the jungle came padding out to feed on the burnt flesh and then, in fear and terror, he ran into the beautiful, warm, Malayan night. For almost a week he wandered through the jungle with a wound that passed right through his chest but miraculously had not penetrated the lungs. Then he was captured and taken to Pudu. His physical wounds had healed but his eyes were sick and he trembled and the colour

drained from his face at the sound of a Japanese voice or shout. He was just eighteen years old.

Grim-faced Lieutenant Ben Hackney was the only other survivor of this massacre and his experience had, if anything, been even more hair raising. Hackney's left leg had been shattered by a mortar shell during the fighting and he too had been left with the wounded at Parit Sulong.

When the massacre commenced, Hackney had shammed dead, and despite being bayoneted *eight* times by Japanese who doubted his demise, he had been successful in feigning death. Successful in spite of the fact that one of the Japanese had roughly dragged the boots from his feet. What agony this must have caused to his broken leg can well be imagined. And yet in the middle of this nightmare of pain and horror he was still cool enough to observe the arrival of the short stocky commander of the Japanese and to note that the Japanese treated him almost as a god.

When I met Hackney in Pudu he was covered with bayonet marks on his legs and body and his left leg was bent at an odd angle. His horrifying experience, far from breaking his nerve, seemed only to make him grim and unyielding to the guards. Hackney appointed himself as the guardian of poor bewildered Jimmy Wharton and more than once stepped between the boy and the guards to protect him. Grim and implacable was Ben Hackney in those days but what an example of guts he set to us all. I was proud that he was an Australian.

Another tragic case was the English boy with the grotesquely swollen face who had the misfortune to have a .5 anti-tank rifle bullet firmly lodged in his jawbone.. The bullet had penetrated the wall of his bren gun carrier and with its power almost spent had smacked into his lower jaw and lay embedded between his teeth and jawbone. Lacking dentists and medical equipment—for all in Pudu were front line troops—there was little we could do but offer sympathy. Every few weeks his jaw would swell as if with an abscess, break, the blood and pus would pour out, and the cycle would begin again.

Possibly the most unusual story of all was that of Jan, a handsome and light-hearted Dutchman. Jan had been the pilot of a Wilderbeeste and in some miraculous fashion had survived without a parachute when his plane had been shot down in flames. He had been forced by the heat on to the tail of the plane and the crash had thrown him clear on to the soft tree tops from which he climbed down unscratched. Knowing his story, one would have been justified in supposing that the gods had other fates in mind for Jan than death. Alas, our charming friend was in the last weeks of his young life.

Also among those unwillingly present were Hugh Moore and his friend, Russell Braddon, who was later to write *The Naked Island.* Hugh, Russ, and several others had been captured by a Japanese patrol who bound them and then dragged them for days through jungle tracks. They were used to find a path through mine fields, deprived of food and water most of the time, and systematically beaten up by the numerous other patrols they encountered. Hugh missed death by inches when they were forced to run the gauntlet through a screaming group of bicycle troops. He warded off and deflected a full-blooded sword swipe with his bare arm and when I met him, his arm gaped open but his blond head was intact upon his shoulders.

There were scores of other all of whom had had remarkable and bizarre experiences and thus the nights were rich in conversation. In our motley ranks of British, Dutch, and Australians, there were men from all walks of life. Mention a country and someone had lived there. Seek information on any subject under the sun and there, only a cell or two away, would be a expert in that field. We had artists, jockeys, businessmen, boxers, planters, school teachers, singers, criminals, and magistrates. Thus, if one were prepared to listen, there was wisdom and entertainment for the taking. We learnt to sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" in Dutch and, tutored by a charming Englishman, we gave forth lustily with the "Horst Wessell" song, much to the anguish of all within earshot.

As my health improved I began to take an interest in community life, and every so often I brought out a "paper" called the *Pudu Presento.* The word "presento," meaning "please give me" or "can I have it?" was universally used by the P.O.W.s in

soliciting gifts from the Japanese. There was only one copy of *Pudu Presento*. It was hand written, and it was pinned to the notice board. I imagine my comments on items of topical interest were fairly weak, but the paper served its purpose.

At that time our cooks were experimenting (with calamitous results) in making rolls from rice flour. The rolls were similar in size and shape to an ordinary round bread roll, and inspired the headlines, SUSPECTED GRENADE DUMP CONFISCATED BY THE I.J.A., AND NIPPONESE SWOOP ON LETHAL WEAPONS IN COOKHOUSE. The article commented on rumours that the Japanese had raided the cookhouse, taken away the suspected grenades for examination, and finally, after breaking most of their test equipment, had discovered that they were rolls.

I had no idea that a group of British prisoners who were on regular work parties at the ammunition dumps were in fact smuggling grenades into Pudu by the dozen. My article caused them great consternation, and resulted in much head-scratching and hissing from the guards who, not having to eat these rolls, completely missed the point.

One of the occasional contributors was Russell Braddon who even then displayed a fine turn of wit. I recall him writing that "The only surprising thing about it all was that what had appeared to be a foregone conclusion, was in fact, a foregone conclusion." This always seemed to me to have a touch of Oscar Wilde about it.

Fanciful as my articles often were, they were nothing compared to those in the Japanese-published newspapers, notably the *Shonan Shinbun,* which for many months was posted on the notice board for our edification. Many of the articles describing "the kindness of the Imperial Japanese Army to the peoples of the occupied territories" were laughable, but it was in descriptions of battle scenes that the Japanese journalists really excelled themselves.

One classic related how the pilot of a Zero repeatedly strafed a British battleship until he ran out of ammunition. Undaunted, our gallant friend flew low and upside down over the battleship, and as he zoomed over the bridge he drew his sword and with a mighty swipe beheaded the Captain of the ship!

Possibly the best of these stories concerned another intrepid

pilot who engaged an overwhelming force of American planes, and shot down seven, even though he took an awful beating in the process. He finally landed his battered plane, staggered to his Commanding Officer, stood to attention, gasped out his report, and collapsed. When a doctor was summoned from the next room he made a quick examination and reported, "This man has been dead for two hours." The article went on to reveal that so invincible was the spirit of this man that it had supported his dead body until his duty had been completed.…

Almost weekly the *Shonan Shinbun* reported a battle in which the bulk of the Allied navies had been sunk, and despite the fact that we knew the paper to be full of comic absurdities and naïve nonsense, it was strangely depressing to read such a continual spate of bad news. We were glad when the Japanese drive began to meet with checks and minor reverses, and the free copies abruptly ceased. Later in the year a special copy of the local paper was issued to celebrate the anniversary of the Imperial Rescript, or some such nonsense, and to mark this momentous occasion a photo of Emperor Hirohito was published. Beneath the Emperor's totally undistinguished features was an awesome list of penalties for defiling the photo, with the supreme penalty reserved for those citizens so disloyal and misguided as to use the Imperial countenance as toilet paper.

The ever-present nightmare to the Australians in those early days was the fear that the Japanese would invade Australia, and to us who knew the country so well it seemed that they had only to attack Sydney and Melbourne to be sure of quick and certain victory. So certain did it seem that Australia must fall to the all-conquering Japanese, that the Pudu guards, many of whom were detailed for the invasion, offered to take letters to Australia for us. Many Puduites, aware that they had almost certainly been posted "Missing believed killed," and worried at the distress that the uncertainty would bring to their families, did take advantage of this offer, and handed over letters for posting in Australia.

The better we got to know the Japanese, the more clearly we visualized the horrors that would follow an invasion of Australia, and when I saw the torment endured by the married men I felt grateful—not for the last time—that I had left Australia without any close ties. There were relatives and girl friends, of course, but

only years later when I became a father did I fully realize the despair those who had left wives and children must have felt.

We thanked God from the depths of our being that our fair land was not invaded and we took tremendous pleasure in the thought that possibly the little that we had done—the seventy days it took to conquer Malaya—had delayed the Japanese just long enough to prevent an invasion. And despite the hunger, the work, the sickness, the beatings, and the humiliation, in that thought we were vastly content.

I had been in Pudu ten weeks before I was considered fit to work. For the first time I was allowed to go out through the great prison gates. We had not marched more than a hundred yards when a Malay woman rushed from the footpath and spat in my face. Actually she had aimed at Jack de Loas, but he had ducked at the crucial moment. As I wiped myself clean on his tattered shirt, he laughed, "Bad luck, son. That sort of thing doesn't often happen now, but you should have been on the early work parties. The Indians and Malays used to hurl stones and abuse almost every day, but now they're starting to wake up and think that perhaps the old order wasn't so bad after all." It was true; public opinion was rapidly hardening against the arrogant and brutal people who had at first been hailed by many as "liberators and fellow Asians."

Minutes later we passed five poles on the side of the main road and on each pole sat a Chinese head. We gazed with fascination at these examples of Nippon culture and were surprised to find that with the blood drained from them, the heads had a waxen peaceful appearance and were not in the least gruesome.

One of the guards, a squat, pudding-faced peasant from Hondo, drew a hand across his throat. "Mati mati, worku finish, all men sama sama." We got the scarcely subtle message, "Wait till the work is finished and you'll end up this way, too." The guards were always at great pains to impress upon us that we had not been accepted as prisoners of war, and that we would be shot when the work was completed.

Our task that day was to sort and stack clothing in a warehouse under the supervision of a gaggle of guards headed by First Class Private Takata. During the day I became friendly enough with Takata to ask for a "presento" of one of the thousands of pairs of

shorts stacked in the warehouse. To my surprise, Takata grunted "Hei," and I quickly took off the shorts with the hole in the seat and put on the new pair. Later that day I helped myself to a new pair of white socks; army boots without socks were hurting my half-healed ankle. As a precaution I smeared the socks with mud to make them appear worn, but it was a careless job and not very convincing.

That evening when work was completed we were lined up to be searched. I found out that Takata had quite a reputation for brutality; in fact only two of our party had taken the risk of helping themselves to clothing. One of them was promptly felled by Takata and had the good sense to stay down, apparently stunned. Takata, brick-red in the face and shouting abuse, then turned his wrath on Jim Potter, who was foolish enough to be wearing a pair of white socks—obviously new. Takata slapped him and punched him systematically working himself into a towering rage. When his best efforts failed to knock his victim off his feet, he stopped, and breathing heavily, pulled off his wide leather belt with the heavy buckle.

As he moved forward to vent his oriental displeasure on a thoroughly apprehensive Jim Potter, one of the other guards, a tactless and over-zealous oaf, tugged at his arm and pointed to my obviously stolen socks. My heart stood still as Takata paused, looked me directly in the eye for a long, long second, and then impatiently pushed me aside and laid into Potter with the heavy belt. Only when Jim's legs were rubbery, and the red blood was trickling through his blond hair, did Takata desist. "All men go campu, hurry upo," he said abruptly. We marched off, two of us supporting our battered friend; young Taffy, the man who had first been knocked down by Takata, said scornfully, "The —— couldn't hit his —— way out of a —— paper bag."

I had learnt two lessons from this episode. One was that even an apparently mild Japanese could be dangerous and unpredictable. The other was that it seemed to be a good ploy to ask for some insignificant trifle from the number one guard, particularly if one intended to steal something worth while. As an N.C.O. I was often in charge of work parties and the prestige of my rank meant that I could sometimes use this gambit with success. It did not always work, of course, and some Japanese

showed their displeasure at the breach of trust in no uncertain manner.

Another trick was to join enthusiastically in the searching of the prisoners, and to assure the Japanese of heavy punishment, no food, etc., once the criminal was back in camp. As a Sergeant in the I.J.A. is the equivalent of a Captain in our Army, the Japanese tended to think that we Sergeants had more authority than we actually had. Our experience in bluffing and outwitting the Japanese was to prove invaluable in the grim years to come.

This was the beginning of three years of hard labour. We were, in effect, a mobile, unpaid Public Works Department, used for a variety of purposes—clearing wrecked bridges or houses, stacking and sorting in warehouses, cleaning streets, delivering beer to hotels, loading and unloading goods trains, and even cleaning sewers. We were mostly used on tasks that required great strength but little skill. Unfortunately for us, almost all the heavy work was performed under the supervision of the Engineering Division of the I.J.A.

Its methods were simple, direct, and effective. The cut of a bamboo was remarkably persuasive: we were induced to lift weights that amazed us. With blows from anything handy—a bayonet or a pick handle, perhaps—we were goaded into accomplishing feats of endurance that we had not considered possible. Each day was a nightmare of slavery and heat. For a people who have no swear words in their language, the Japanese managed to sound unbelievably menacing and obscene as they snarled “speedo speedo,” “bugerro” (fool), and “damme damme” (no good). We could always rely on returning to Pudu bone-weary, bruised, blood-smeared, and dreading the next day.

Fortunately for our sanity, there was an infinite variety of work at Pudu, and often the Fates were kind and allowed us a glimpse of another side to the Japanese character.…

One particular day’s duty took a party of us to a Japanese brothel, officers’ class, where we were equipped with hammer and nails and set to work with instructions to straighten up some sadly sagging beds and render them free from squeaks. The Japanese women—a race apart from their men—had nothing but kindness for us, and, with much hissing and exclamation over our gaunt figures, insisted on loading us with fruit and rice cakes. Our

hapless guards were scolded until their faces were as red as if they had been drinking *sake*.

On another occasion a party of us were marched off with picks and shovels to the river bank. We had been detailed to gather worms for a Japanese officer's canary.…Our bandy-legged little guard in his ragged, ill-fitting uniform confided to us that if we co-operated, we could all have a "yasume" (rest). With that, he handed us his rifle and promptly went to sleep under a tree. We wasted time by working only when someone of potential authority appeared in the distance, and by buying chappatis, coffee, and fruit from the local Chinese. In this way our chore lasted the whole day. Our little guard was soundly slapped by his Sergeant when we returned, having spent nine hours on Project Worm, but as he handed us over to our own guards at the prison gates, he said with a completely straight face, "Roko mai, ne-ju wormu, joto yasume." (Six men, twelve worms, good rest.)

A hot steamy day in June found us unenthusiastically digging graves at the town cemetery. Our guard of the day was a One Star Private named Morimoto who six months earlier had been a happy peasant on a farm in Kyushu. During our lunch break Morimoto told us in a mixture of English, Malay, and Japanese, of the highlight of his life—a visit to Tokyo where he had seen the Emperor and his family ride by. With quite comical gestures he showed us how everyone knelt as the Royal family passed and how, if anyone was so unwise as to lift his head, it was lopped off.

One of the members of our party was a former rubber planter named Bill Stafford who had been a top ski man before the war. Bill pulled his long body from the grave in which he had been sheltering from the sun and said casually, "Ah, yes, Prince Chichibu. A charming fellow, simply charming."

Morimoto gazed at Stafford's long bony body with the ringworm and tinea sores; he took in Stafford's scruffy, unshaven face and his tattered shorts, and his eyes grew like saucers in his round, simple face.

"You speaku Chichibu-san-ka?" he asked in an awed voice.

"Hei," replied Bill, "Prince Chichibu and I zoom zoom Switzerland."

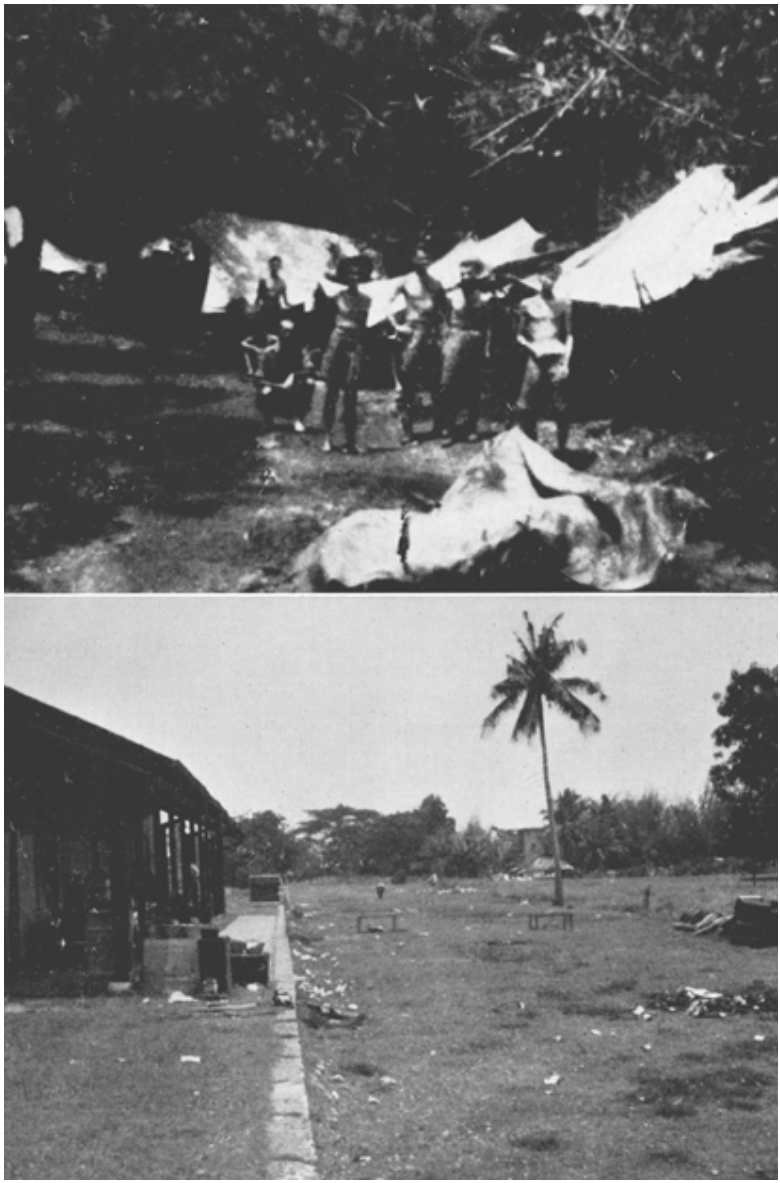
For the rest of the day Bill was treated as an honoured guest

and sat smirking under the shade of a tree while Morimoto brought him bananas and iced tea and while we commoners sweated and dug graves.

The Japanese gave us a minimum food ration and absolutely nothing else—no clothing, no medicine, nothing. To counteract this lack and to assert our independence, we stole. We stole with a whole-hearted enthusiasm and purpose that would have delighted our bushranger ancestors. We stole at every opportunity and with the dedication of saints. The Japanese, naturally, took exception to this and searched and bashed, but always the cunning of the P.O.W.s kept them one step ahead, and food, medicine, and clothing—indeed, anything not actually nailed down—disappeared as if by sleight of hand.

As the never-ending drain provided by seven hundred enthusiastic thieves continued, the Japanese measures grew stricter but their strange, one-track minds were a great help to us. Early searches were of a "pat the pockets" variety, and, with various items of loot strapped to the small of our backs and to the insides of our thighs, we were seldom called upon to pay the penalty of our sins. Later it became almost routine for us to be ordered to strip off all clothing before a search. It was then that the water bottles and dixies with the false bottoms, the boots with the false platform sole, and the hollow pith helmets proved their worth. For months we stripped off all clothing for searches but not once did it occur to our slow-witted captors to order us to remove our motley assortment of headgear.

However, from experience I can vouch for the fact that it takes years off one's life to stand naked and have an evil tempered, truculent Jap guard look between your legs, under your armpits and in other cavities hitherto private and inviolate, while you stand uncomfortably on dozens of packets of razor blades and wear a top-heavy pith helmet packed with sewing machine needles and bicycle chains. And all the time you are worried in case you might



Cholera block, Konyu.

Ghost railway station Malacca, 1960.

Shimonovseki.

The photo Wally Johnson took from the Japanese tent at Hintok.

Khaw Kok Teen, serious for once.

Puteh Merican.

be asked a question, in which case it could be difficult to disguise the bottle of aspirin in your mouth.

But the afterglow of a successful coup was a many splen-dored thing, and many a man who had known the icy fingers of fear during the search, felt it more than worth while when the medical boys smiled and said, “Thanks, mate, we can certainly do with these.”

Our thieving was always aided and abetted by the local population, who eagerly bought whatever we could offer. If the Japanese hoped to humiliate us by marching us to work through the main streets, they were disappointed. The abusiveness and arrogance of the I.J.A. had completely disillusioned the people of Kuala Lumpur, who were coming to regard themselves as just as much victims of the Japanese as we ourselves. This created a very strong bond between us.

To be sure, the fat-bellied little Malay boys with their bewitching air of wisdom and innocence no longer ran along beside us chattering, “You give cigarette, tuan? Chewing gum? You like my sister, tuan? Only three dollar, tuan. Very clean. You got chocolate, tuan?” But from these same youngsters would come a cautious hiss, “Hey Joe, catch,” and bananas or coconuts were thrown into our ranks. Our audacity never quite equalled that of the Singapore P.O.W., who for months on end drew four gallons of petrol a day to start a steamroller. For sheer cunning the Australians were on their own, but the hair-raising bluff of the English and the Scots won our admiration, even if we lacked the nerve to pay them the supreme compliment of copying them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AS THE DAYS dragged on, a pattern was established in our life at Pudu; it was only later that we realized just how good a camp it was by Japanese standards. Our Masters were living a conqueror's life almost in the heart of a large city and they were quite content to stay put, while their less fortunate comrades fought and died in New Guinea. We were lucky in having a wise and tolerant Japanese Commandant at Pudu, and the guards under him were as lenient as any we were to meet.

Many had wondered if the fabric of discipline would break down under the abnormal strain of P.O.W. life, but our Pudu officers were generally respected, and their task was an easy one. Much of this respect had been earned the hard way in the early days of Pudu when the Japanese had requested every man to sign a form promising, on his honour, not to escape. As this would have been a direct contravention of the military rule which states that it is the *duty* of every prisoner to escape where possible, the whole camp refused to a man.

Our officers were then seized, packed into a suffocating cell without water or toilet facilities, and told that there they would stay until they ordered us to sign. Three long days and nights later they were still holding out when the Japanese, who had encountered similar opposition at Changi, produced permission from the top-ranking British officer in Singapore for us to sign under duress. In these circumstances, we complied without hesitation, and not one man considered himself bound in any way by a signature obtained in this manner.

Our officers—dirty, unshaven, and louse-ridden—were released, and from then on were held in the highest regard by their men.

One thing that made life at Pudu easier to bear was the harmony that existed between the English, the Welsh, the Scots, and the Australians. There was a lot of amusement at one another's expense, but it was tolerant amusement.

The Malay Volunteers, formerly the rubber planters, business men, and administrators of Malaya, were like good music—often

difficult to appreciate at first, but most rewarding as time goes by. We had considered them stand-offish, and they, although far too polite to admit it, had dismissed us as raucous and uncouth Colonials. We had resented their English custom of calling people by their surnames, and they had been startled by our brash Christian-name familiarity. But in time these differences were waived, and warm friendships developed.

These were further cemented when the Japanese gave permission for the prisoners to stage a concert each yasume day. Various groups took it in turn to put on these concerts; they were performed in a well between the British lines and were watched by every man in Pudu, including the guards.

Of them all, the Australian concerts were far and away the most popular but it must quickly be added that much of this stemmed from the fact that we were the one group everybody could understand. Barely half the camp could understand the Pommie performers and *nobody* could understand the uncoo' Scotties but themselves. To watch a Scots comedian in action was a strange experience with one third of the audience in convulsions while the others sat in blank-faced mystification.

There was always an air of anticipation when an Australian concert was mooted, and, because we could not hope to equal the natural harmony and singing of our European brothers, we tended to present a very mixed bag of acts. Because of our lack of natural talent, these were strenuously rehearsed in our cells at night.

An item that received an uproarious reception was the old-time melodrama, "The Little Mill Girl." Russ Braddon was the guiding spirit here and assembled a fine cast, lacking only the perfect villain. Frantically casting about for a really villainous type, their gaze fell on a new chum not long out of hospital and with a whoop of joy, they realized that the search had ended.

"Just look at that shaven bumpy skull," chortled Jack Menzies.

"Boy, how about those glittering eyes?" asked Jim McCloy.

"Look at that sinister limp. Perfect," exalted Jack Mullins.

"And the lovely semi-skeleton appearance," gloated Reg Dudley.

And so I became Murgatroyd Murdoch and, with Russ Braddon

as my daughter, Sybil, hammed and hissed my way with such a compelling appearance that even today I am occasionally greeted as “Murgatroyd.”

Another item of great hilarity was the ballet in which the hairy-chested “ballerinas” were to hurl their coconut shell brassieres at the audience and in particular at the Japanese who always demanded the first few rows at the Australian concerts.

In Russell Braddon, I feel that a lyricist of note has been lost to the world, for some of his lyrics for our comic operettas were gems. Gleefully, he took arias, ballads, and hymns, and gave them topical and bawdy new lyrics.

Staff Sergeant Brown was a well-known and controversial figure at Pudu, and two of Braddon’s splendid lines—beefed out lustily by a chorus of twenty—were …

“Tell me the old old story,

Of Brown and his tinea on the balls.”

Irreverent, yes, but in its time and place, magnificent. In any case, Sergeant Brown and his affliction are forever immortalized in my mind whenever I hear the grand old hymn.

Concert nights were pure nostalgia for us—and for the Japanese—and for a few hours allowed us to forget the grey stone walls, the stomachs that growled for food, and the screaming sadists who awaited us on the morrow.

As another concession the Japanese allowed us to play baseball (with a soft ball), in the big prison quadrangle on the afternoon of each yasume day. This soon developed into an organized competition with teams representing the English, the Welsh, the Scots, and the Australians, all taking part. For several yasume days, the bored Japanese guards on duty watched with obvious interest and then asked if they could field a team. We could hardly refuse and so the I.J.A. entered the competition. The Japanese showed a natural affinity for the game, and, being much better fed and healthier than we, were very worthy opponents. Despite our initial misgivings, all seemed to be going smoothly until their national obsession with “face” brought disaster.

Leadership lay clearly between the Japanese and the Australians, and we played them one hot afternoon in September 1942. I was catching for the Australian team and we noticed that

the second Japanese batter was heckled all the way to the plate by the other guards. From what we could gather, he claimed to be a star player in Nippon and much *sake* had tempted him into a great deal of boasting about his prowess. Rod McLeod hurled down the first ball, our little friend swung mightily, there was a loud and distinct snick, the ball stuck in my fingers, and under Pudu rules our Nippon warrior was out.

The other guards were almost helpless with laughter and several had tears streaming down their cheeks. This was just too much for our little friend who, with many threatening growls of "Kurra" and swishes of the bat at me (for catching him), refused to heed the umpire. Finally, like a petulant little boy, he went to the guardhouse where he locked himself in one of the toilets and sat on our only bat. An appeal was made to the guard commander in an effort to regain it and the final result was that, from then on, all baseball was banned at Pudu.

Thus also ended a rather unique example of the Japanese fraternizing with P.O.W.s.

But these diversions were interludes only, and all the time we were playing baseball and arranging concerts, the "happy feet" men were wearily walking the corridors, and sick men were dying. And if the Japanese despised us for being prisoners, they were at least consistent, for they had proved over and over again that *they* would die rather than surrender.

We could loathe everything they stood for, be disgusted at their cruelty, shake our heads incredulously at their stupidity, be scornful of their duplicity, laugh ourselves sick at the thought of such men believing they descended from the Sun God. But one thing we could not doubt: they were brave. Probably the bravest soldiers in the world. I knew that they had been conditioned to a sort of fanaticism. I knew that it was a military weakness that often they stood and died uselessly, when it would have been more effective to fall back and fight again. But to me, as a soldier, they were always—the brave Japanese.

The pity of it was that the honours gained in battle were so tarnished by their callous behaviour as conquerors. Their fierce and savage hatred of us pointed to something beyond the realms of war, to some deep-buried and long-suppressed hatred of one race for another. And yet it was not entirely a question of colour.

The Chinese, too, suffered incredible tortures at their hands. They were flogged on the jail whipping triangle; subjected to mock hangings that were stopped at the last minute, just before the trap was sprung; given salt water for days, and then allowed to drink their fill of cold clear water, after which they were jumped on or punched heavily in the stomach so that water gushed from eyes, mouth, and nostrils; or they were suspended by the feet while urine, and sometimes iodine, was poured down the nostrils; or made to kneel for hours on sharp stones. And sometimes it was mental torture. The favourite Japanese trick was to tell the prisoners that one of them was to be executed the next morning. The agony of that night was indescribable for them all.

Little wonder that, in oriental fashion, the night was filled with their wails of fear and foreboding. Next day the victim would be executed, the survivors would sigh with relief, and we would march past yet another head, peaceful on its pole, and feel a surge of pity and anger that one who had shared our hopes and fears in Pudu was now dead.

One of the outstanding men of Pudu was Frank Van Rennan who, like Smiley, had been left with a few men to act as a guerrilla force behind the Japanese lines. Van Rennan had surrendered after the fall of Singapore, but only because his activities had been goading the Japanese into mass executions in the area where his demolitions and explosions were taking place. He and his friends—rubber planters in Malaya before the war—had been quietly making plans with native friends, and intended to escape from Pudu and make their way to the west coast, where a boat would be waiting to take them to India.

They were bold men with a bold plan, but it was one that had every chance of success. Van Rennan and his friends knew the country well; they were fluent in the local languages, and they had loyal helpers. They were going to wear native costume and travel only at night. To ensure an adequate crew for the voyage across the Indian Ocean, Frank accepted two outside recruits for the escape party. One was my fellow Sergeant, Ken Bell, and the other was the handsome young Dutchman, Jan, whose escape from his burning Wildebeeste had been so miraculous that his presence in the party was considered to be a guarantee of its success.

In order to gain a margin of time for his party before pursuit began, Van Rennan approached the British leaders of the camp, and asked that the roll-calls be faked for twenty-four hours. But our officers had the welfare of the majority to consider, and they were doubtful anyway whether the absence of eight men could be covered up successfully, so they refused.

However, after the escape party had left by a side gate whose lock had been forced, our officers changed their minds, and decided to give the escapees their requested start.

This change of plan was to have complications.

Van Rennan and his men left that night, resolute and hopeful, but they were dogged by ill-luck right from the start. What they had not anticipated was the effectiveness of the ruthless Japanese decree that, if prisoners escaped and were recaptured, mass executions would take place in all villages between the point of departure and the point of capture. With this terrible threat in mind every native, anti-British or not, was alert to report escapees. Who could blame them? Consequently the escape party was not even clear of Kuala Lumpur before they were seized by natives and forced to fight their way clear. Twice more during the night they were attacked and fought their way free, but at first light they were surrounded by such a large force of Japanese that, despite the grenades the small party carried, they had no option but to surrender.

Almost at the same time as they were being surrounded, we fell in for the morning roll-call, committed to the task of covering up for the missing men. This was accomplished by arranging for various men to request permission to go to the “benjo”; they were to rejoin the parade as soon as we had distracted our guard. As most of us had dysentery it was quite normal for a small percentage of men to have to leave the roll-calls hastily.

Our simple little guard, Second Class Private Ukemi counted us, and, with the aid of some unprecedented co-operation from us, managed to get the figures right first time. He then added the number of men he had allowed to go to the benjo and found to his pleasure that the total was the same as the previous day. Sweating and beaming at the same time—counting was ever an ordeal for the peasant guards—he croaked, “Okay, all men yasume,” and set off to hand in his figures to the guardhouse.

We stood easy and waited to see if the English and Scots had also been successful in their deception, for there were three other groups to be checked, and until all the figures were in no one was dismissed.

Our British friends had not failed us and soon Ukemi returned from the guardhouse, drew himself up to his full sixty-one inches, hawked, spat noisily on the grassy quadrangle and said, “Okay, all men mishi mishi.”

We went to our breakfast of a mug of gluey rice, happy in the thought that we had afforded our friends at least a twelve-hour start.

To our dismay, they were back in the jail by midday, tightly shackled and closely guarded. They were downcast and pale, but did not appear to have been beaten up in any way. The guards marched them off to the cells above the guardhouse, where they were kept without food or water for two days. The position grew more ominous daily; we were not allowed to visit the prisoners, and even the friendlier of the guards would not discuss the matter. Obviously they were waiting on instructions from Singapore.

Questions were fired at us. How did a roll-call show eight men in Pudu at a time when they were being recaptured some twelve miles away? That was easy. We quickly explained that this was because neither Ukemi nor his three moronic mates could count at all once they ran out of fingers and thumbs. Ah, so-ka! And how did Van Rennan and his party come to be armed with grenades? This was a curly one; our officers could not very well admit they had been smuggled in by working parties. They were forced to temporize. “Might this have been the work of native rebels and trouble-makers?” they suggested.

Strangely enough, these feeble explanations appeared to be accepted, but none the less, hordes of the dreaded Kempi Tai (Military Police) descended on Pudu and searched it from whipping post to execution chamber. By then, of course, every item likely to incur their wrath had been well and truly buried. Our officers were slapped around a little, and then as far as we were concerned, the matter was dropped.

But for the escape party things still looked ominous. Van Rennan, obviously under no illusions, contrived to drop a note

into the quadrangle urging us to appeal for mercy for Ken Bell and Jan, both of whom were only twenty-three. This we did, as forcefully as we could; our own guards seemed to see the justice of the plea and, with much nodding, agreed that they were "baby soldiers."

Despite this hopeful sign, the die had been cast, and next morning—the third of their captivity—they were brought to the jail entrance, where a military truck was waiting. They were bound hand and foot and were obviously very weak. A guard motioned them to get on the truck. As they sat there Van Rennan pointed with his foot to their haversacks that lay heaped on the ground. The answer was a death sentence, "Nei." There could be only one reason why they would not require their belongings and every man present knew it with a stabbing clarity.

For a few long minutes we stood staring at the eight bound men. Twice I tried to call to Ken Bell, "See you in Singapore, Ken," and twice I got as far as "See—" and could not go on. We smiled, but our smiles were strained, and as the big gates swung open and the truck jerked forward, there was little hope in our hearts.

In a brutal fashion, one that lacked any form of grace or humanity whatever, the half-starved prisoners, weak and flat from the lack of food, the constant strain, and the close shackling, were taken through the colorful bustling streets of K.L., forced to dig their own graves and then shot down into them.

As the big prison gates closed behind them, my thoughts were of Ken Bell, and for the hundredth time, I marvelled at his unlucky career in the Army. When I first joined the Regiment, Ken was Senior Troop Sergeant and I was tremendously impressed by his ability. Well built, intelligent, and strong minded, he was an outstanding N.C.O. and possessed every quality needed for success. Yet somehow, the breaks never came. Junior N.C.O.s with scarcely half of Ken's ability (including myself) had been constantly preferred to him. Time after time he was overlooked and the only visible reaction was that his dark good looks grew constantly more sardonic.

Even in action, Fate had played him the shabbiest of tricks. Belatedly detailed to go to Gemas as an extra gun, Ken and his crew had been sent back as not required. They were then given a

lonely position in a back area and after days of isolation and growing doubts, their worst fears were confirmed when a strong force of Japanese appeared from the jungle *behind* them and took them prisoner. They had not fired a shot nor seen a Jap until the very moment of capture.

As if this humiliation were not enough, an ironic twist of Fate decreed that they should be beaten savagely by Japanese tank crews (and Bill McGlone bayoneted to death) as a reprisal for the losses we had inflicted on the First Japanese Tank Division at Gemas.

Despite the roles which Fate had cast for us—Ken bound and sentenced to death and I fast recovering health and strength—I knew full well as I watched him on the truck and met his bold sardonic eyes, that he was a far stronger character and a better soldier than I could ever hope to be. And as the truck carried the quiet party through the streets of Kuala Lumpur, so full of colour and teeming with life, I marvelled again at the chance that allowed a man of his potential to die such a useless death with his talents barely touched.

Ken, Jan, Van Rennan, Graham, Harvey, and the others—Australian, Dutch, and English—are long dead now and lie quietly far from the lands of their birth, but while the men of Pudu live, their memory will live also.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE JAPANESE, REFUSING to acknowledge such archaic codes of military conduct as those laid down by the Geneva Convention, kept control of prisoners of war by brute force, and no matter how much we protested against work which helped their war effort, they always had their way. "Work, or you will be shot," they said, and their ultimatum was backed up by machine-guns. They had other methods, too, more subtle. Against the threat to turn the hospitals out and put the sick to work—a certain death sentence to many—we had no effective counter. It was galling enough to be out of the fight and unable to help our country at such a desperate stage, but to be compelled to assist the Japanese to fight our comrades was intolerable. But, to be quite brutal at the same time, we were not prepared to die for our principles.

Most of us had one simple philosophy. We would do only what we were forced to do and we would do it as badly as possible. We would use sabotage at every opportunity and never would we volunteer for anything requiring special skills. Consequently there were mixed feelings in Pudu when the Japanese called for a party of electricians to go to Japan and received many volunteers for the trip. Many felt that the volunteering of special skills could not be justified and quite a few skilled tradesmen went to great lengths to hide their qualifications.

One highly qualified engineer made a practice of marking his calling as "Centenary bell ringer," Another man, a fitter and turner by trade, gave his profession as "Bullshit merchant" for three and a half years without ever being queried. Yet another stated his profession as that of "Banana straightener" and judging from the number who hopefully claimed their profession as "Brothel Inspector," or "Beer Tester," the Japanese must have gained quite a strange impression of Australian social life. All beer and skittles, as it were.

To be quite fair, the Japan party men saw only adventure and escape from boredom in the trip, to them there was no degree of difference in how, or where, one worked for the Japanese. It was all a matter of outlook and it was quite easy for me to moralize. I had little in the way of technical skill to offer.

As they were being taken via Singapore, I took the opportunity of writing a report to Major Quick, listing all the Anti-Tank men in Pudu, and giving what information we had of others, such as Freddie Peake. At this stage we were not certain if those in Singapore even knew of the existence of our camp. As it happened, our friends in Singapore had heard vague rumours of a camp on the mainland, but had long since dismissed them as wishful thinking. We had all been listed as "Missing believed killed." So my message, when it reached Major Quick, came like a voice from the grave.

The Major immediately called a meeting of all Anti-Tank men in Changi. When they were all gathered, he read the report, and as each man's name was read out as being safe and sound in Pudu, a great burst of cheering went up from that man's particular friends. However, it was left to Ken Daniel to pay the most sincere tribute. Ken was confined to a hospital bed with very painful feet at the time but, when a friend rushed in and said, "Hey Ken, guess what? Harrison and his crew have just turned up in a camp at K.L.," he became so excited that, forgetting his feet and the pain, he jumped out of bed and jigged around the room with joy.

Among the flotsam and jetsam of a beaten Army that drifted into Pudu from time to time, there came two Argylls, sick unto death and bright with fever. Theirs was a moving story that had its beginning months previously when thirty-nine men of the Second Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were cut off in the shambles that was Slim River. After vainly trying to link up with our retreating forces, they had waged a war of their own until their ammunition was gone and Singapore had fallen.

They had then formed the plan of building palm shelters in the jungle and living in freedom until the British returned. Alas, they found that the jungle—to men without medicine or proper food—can be as cruel as the Japanese and just as deadly. One by one they died of malaria, jungle fever, and homesickness, and the rows of crosses grew in the dim clearing until, like the ten little nigger boys, only four were left. When all four went down with fever and two of them died, the survivors, seeking at the end the friends they had heard were in Pudu, came out of the lethal jungle and gave themselves up.

They were not long with us but while they lived they had everything that was in our power to give. And if there were no bagpipes to lament their passing, at least their last days were spent surrounded by their fellow Argylls and the air was thick with the broad burr of their own incomprehensible tongue. Jock from Dornoch Firth, who was with them, told us, “They had many friends at the end and the wee lads were no unhappy.”

It was a unique feature of Pudu that from time to time new arivals were brought in to swell our ranks and each had a fresh and interesting story to tell. Mowatt and Elliott were decidely unusual in that they had actually escaped from Changi camp on Singapore Island. They had stolen a boat and crossed the causeway in brilliant moonlight to make a successful landing on the shores of Johore. They had then set out to march firmly northward with the simple and uncomplicated plan of marching through Malaya to Thailand and through Thailand to Burma and then on to India! This magnificently impossible plan foundered on the third day when a party of Malays felled them with parangs and handed them over to Nippon.

Geoffrey Mowatt, shortish, curly-haired, cultured, and a magistrate before the war, arrived in Pudu with a great gash in the side of the head and gave the general impression that he had encountered a raiding party of Sioux. Despite the bloodthirsty weal that mocked his gentle features, Geoff never lost his sense of fun—except when he described the method of his capture. Then his soft voice developed an unpleasant edge and one thought that Justice Mowatt might administer summary, rather than legal justice, if he ever met a certain parang-wielding Malay.

Elliott, by contrast, was a sombre man and kept completely to himself—brooding no doubt on his failure to walk to India—but Mowatt with his humour and knowledge of music was a delightful character and was sought out by all. I was delighted that the Japanese never guessed that they were escapees from Singapore—for then they would surely have been shot—and besides, not everyone can boast that he has cleaned sewers with a magistrate clad only in a loin cloth.

On what was to be one of our last work parties at Kuala Lumpur we marched to a motor works, now used as a transport centre. For some odd reason, the really tiny Japanese always

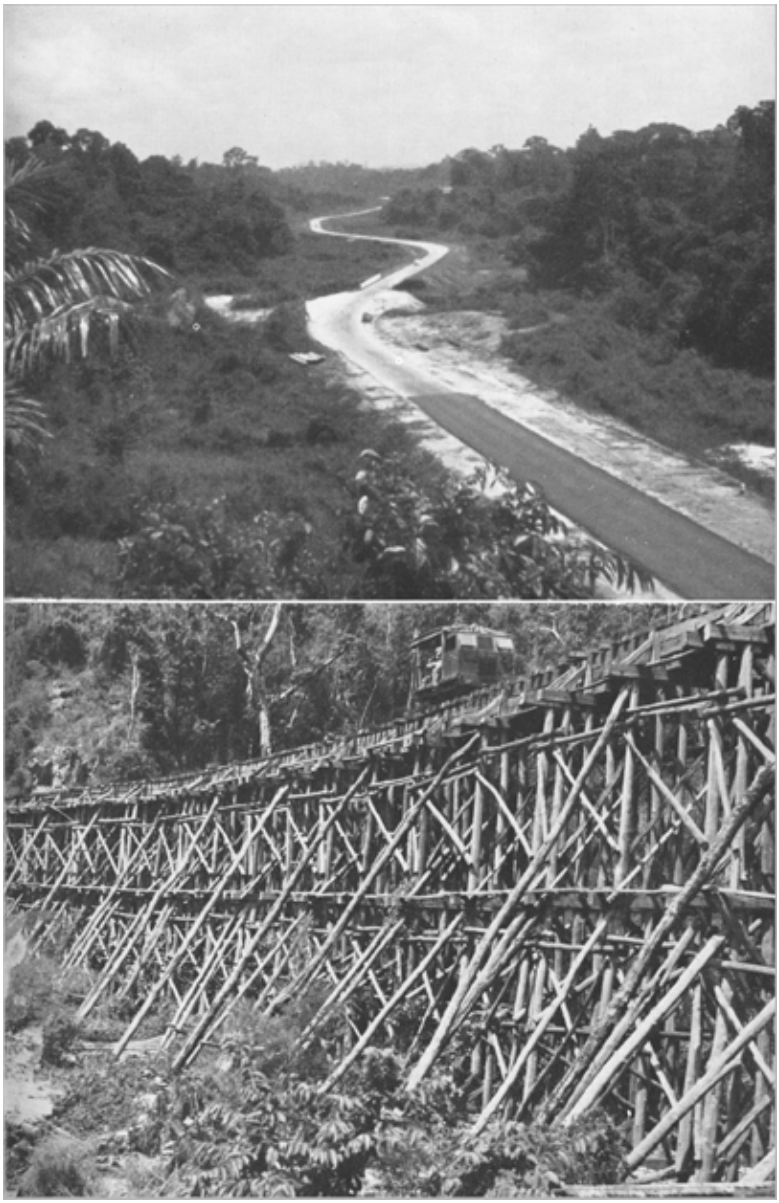
seemed to be drafted to the transport section of their Army, and the gang assembled at the factory were no bigger than schoolboys. However, their tempers were king-size and they counterbalanced any lack of strength by a shrewd choice of weapons.

As we came to the entrance gate, we saw a Chinese woman tied to a post in front of the guardhouse. She was young and was probably normally quite attractive, but now her face was tear-stained and she waited with terror. While we were being counted our thickset, bandy-legged little guard found his concentration impaired by her moans and, with eyes flashing with annoyance, he barked a command at her. This only made the girl wail more loudly than ever.

Looking around furiously, our friend spotted me in the front rank and shouted, “Mota koi, speedo, speedo.” (Come here, quickly.) I came with alacrity, for that red face and swelling neck betokened danger. I was wearing a red spotted bandanna around my head, pirate fashion, and the guard grabbed it from my head, rolled it into a ball, and stuffed it into the mouth of the Chinese girl. Like many Japanese expedients, it was highly efficient, and after one startled grunt her wails ceased abruptly.

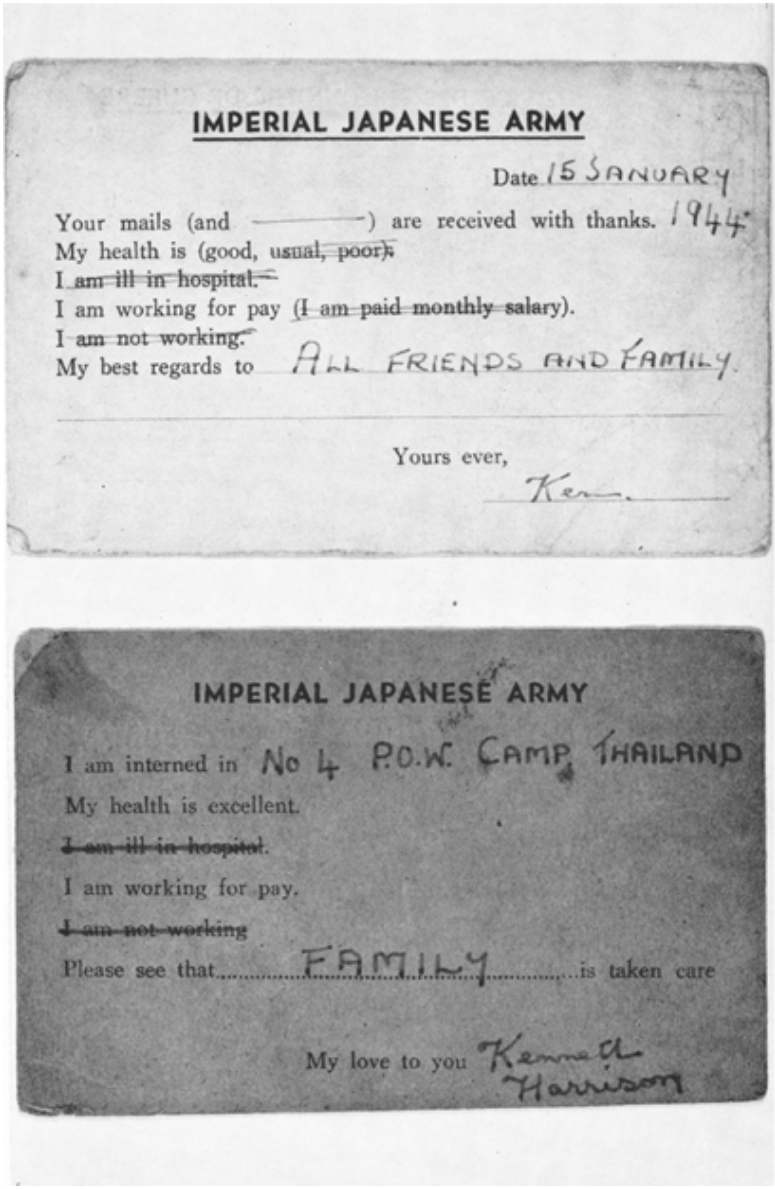
Twice during the day I went to ask for the bandanna in an effort to help the Chinese girl who sagged in her ropes in the hot sun. Twice I was growled away, the second time with a stinging ear for a bonus.

We had a bad day with our evil-tempered friends, and that night when we lined up to be searched there was



Scene of the 2/30th battalion's ambush at Gemas. Gemencheh 'Bridge in centre.

The "Pack of Cards" bridge, Hintok.



IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

Date 15 JANUARY

Your mails (and ————) are received with thanks. 1944

My health is (good, ~~usual, poor~~).

~~I am ill in hospital.~~

I am working for pay (~~I am paid monthly salary~~).

~~I am not working.~~

My best regards to ALL FRIENDS AND FAMILY.

Yours ever,

Ken.

IMPERIAL JAPANESE ARMY

I am interned in No 4 P.O.W. CAMP THAILAND

My health is excellent.

~~I am ill in hospital.~~

I am working for pay.

~~I am not working~~

Please see that FAMILY is taken care

My love to you Kenneth Harrison

P.O.W. postcards.

menace in the air. The First Class Private in charge of the Japs was a diminutive, sadistic man named Tomachi; he was quite good-looking and very vain, and as he strutted importantly in front of us while we were being searched we noted

apprehensively that he was carrying his trade mark—a billiard cue.

Obviously disappointed when the search, as usual, uncovered nothing, Tomachi was determined not to be cheated of his finest hour, and mounting a soap-box, he treated us to a stirring oration which might have stung lesser men to shame.

"Englishu soldier no goodera," said Tomachi with great feeling, "Very bad worker. Steal all time from Nippon. Benjo benjo all time. Speak bad words like —— and —— all time. Talk jiggy-jig —— and all time. Nippon punish one man one!"

None could dispute the truth of his remarks, but the justice of the sentence did not prevent the old hands from immediately stuffing anything soft into their hats as a padding. Others, less experienced, stuffed whatever padding they had into the seats of their shorts. Our smiles at their innocence left our faces when the Jap underlings came running up and down the rows, enthusiastically knocking off all headgear. Following them, like the incarnation of Nippon justice, came Tomachi. His task of hitting forty men on the head with his billiard cue was accomplished with an expression of utter dedication.

I was fortunate in being one of the first, for those at the head of the line were treated only to the small end of the cue. Despite Tomachi's size, he was wiry, and when he crashed down the cue with both hands he inflicted stunning pain. We rubbed our bumps and then—human nature being what it is—took a keen and ribald interest in the reaction of our fellow victims as the cue descended on them. However, near the end of the front row, the small end of the cue cracked, and the men in the second row were hit sickeningly with the heavy end and then, abruptly, it ceased to be a joke.

As we came to the guardhouse I rubbed my head, on which there was a most prominent bump, and asked again for the bandanna. To my surprise, the little pock-marked guard on duty grinned broadly, rubbing his bullet head in mockery, and said, "Hei." I pulled the sodden bandanna, greasy with saliva, from the girl's bulging mouth and asked, "Nippon, mizu Okay-ka?" He looked around and his reply came too fast for me but I caught the words "Dai ichi" (number one) and then "Okay." This was good enough and I held my water bottle to the girl's mouth. She tried

desperately to drink, but nine hours of a large gag had stiffened her mouth, so that more water stained her satin jacket than went down her throat.

The next second Tomachi appeared. The guard let out a roar of "Mizu *neiY!"* and swung a violent blow at me which he "pulled" to such an extent that, for all its apparent ferocity, it was hardly more than a buffet. As we marched off it occurred to me that kindness, like wildflowers, blooms in the most unlikely places, even in the heart of a pock-marked, bullet-headed Japanese guard.

The year 1942 grew old, and we of Pudu grew brown, thin, and hard.

Nippon, in a gesture embodying the highest principles of bushido, decided that prisoners of war should be paid for services rendered, and that for every working day of ten hours of sweat and blood we would be given a whole ten cents, tax free! The purchasing power of ten cents in wartime Malaya was on a par with Japanese generosity, but we were delighted with the opportunity to help the sick, and with six hundred men contributing several cents a day, we were able to provide the "hospital" with eggs and fruit, which caused the death rate to drop sharply.

We four pooled our earnings, and bought coconuts for vitamins, and blachang (shrimp paste) for flavouring. None of these, however, appeared to help George McCracken a great deal, and it was obvious from his gaunt body and bony face that the bout of fever in the jungle had taken its toll.

Dick Voege had a tooth knocked out, and for the next three years self-consciously held a hand in front of his mouth whenever he laughed. Jack McGlone was Jack McGlone—quiet, good humoured, and uncomplaining. Sometimes we felt like shooting him.

Then suddenly, on a day in November, the Japanese Commandant said, "All men go Singapore, speedo." Once we realized that this was no idle rumour we became quite excited at the prospect of rejoining old friends, and even the guards smiled as they told us, "Shonan campu damme damme. Worku finish all men bang bang." (Singapore camp very bad. When the work is finished you will be shot.)

One of the splendid things about Pudu was that rank and nationality had never counted in the least. We associated with those whom we liked and admired, and that was the sole criterion. Thus men from Glasgow had "buddied" with men of Brisbane, and others from all parts of Australia had joined forces with kindred spirits from England. Now we were separated into parties according to nationalities and there came a sadness as we realized that the mateship of Pudu was ending and that its like might never come again.

The Australians were the first to leave and marched out of the big gates to a chorus of, "Goodbye Jock"; "Cheerio Geordie"; "Bye Aussie"; "See you in Singapore Taffy," and the like. Small presents had been exchanged; ridiculous things such as a hard boiled egg, or two bananas. The Englishmen, typically, would look you in the eye and with great seriousness and natural dignity, say, "By the way, Harrison. Put these in your bag, like a good chap. Might come in handy and all that sort of thing, you know."

The Aussies, also typically, would hand their present over with a broad grin and a request to, "Here, shove these up your arse, you scruffy old bastard." What they meant, of course, and would have said but for the Australian soldiers' horror of showing emotion, was "Good luck, friend, and God be with you."

We left Pudu with its great stone walls, its terrified Asian prisoners, and its memories, and marched through the streets of Kuala Lumpur for the last time. We left behind us, in the cemetery, many of our best and brightest men. We were to leave many more, in many another cemetery, but that lay in the future. For the moment it was enough that we were going to Singapore, to Changi, and to old friends.

Singapore, Changi and Thailand

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THERE IS ALWAYS a rare joy in the meeting of old friends. In our case, with so many of us listed as missing or dead, the reunion was ecstatic. Enthusiastic whacks made backs sore, and throats became hoarse with "do you remember?" But there was also sadness, for many good friends had died in the desperate, disorganized fight to save Singapore.

Changi itself was rather incredible to us Pudu men, and in many ways could have been called a P.O.W.s' paradise. The Changi area was situated on the eastern end of the island. It was on a promontory that jutted into the Straits of Singapore, and was three parts bordered by water. At its longest diameters, it was roughly four miles by three and a half miles. Before the war it had been occupied by the permanent British garrison and had many large three-storey brick barracks and bungalows set in its well-grassed lawns. A profusion of trees and coconut palms provided shade and delighted the eye.

At the fall of Singapore, the Japanese had suddenly found themselves responsible for the care of more than 50,000 British troops, including about 15,000 Australians. They solved their problems very neatly by herding their foster children into the Changi area, and erecting barbed wire along the one part not surrounded by sea. They then issued the edict, "Rations will be dumped at the front entrance from time to time. Run your own camp!"

So, if food was always in rather short supply, there was the magnificent compensation that one could go months without seeing a Japanese. And, if the tummy growled continuously, there was a splendid freedom from working parties and the knowledge that the only danger likely in Changi, was the possibility of a head wound if one met an officer and came up too smartly to the salute.

For one of the amazing things about Changi was that our army

had succeeded in establishing something very close to pre-war discipline and procedure. Officers wore badges of rank and were saluted at all times; there were roll calls, CO.'s parades, kit inspections, fatigues, and even smoke nights in the Sergeants' Mess. There were many vociferous complaints about the "spit and polish," and many sincerely objected to saluting officers who had proved abject failures in action. The task of the authorities had not been an easy one when fifty thousand men—some dispirited, others resentful and angry with their leaders—had been suddenly poured into Changi. Obviously such a large number of men could not be allowed to sit around and brood. Discipline, morale, hygiene, and self-respect had to be restored, and vigorous steps were taken to re-form units with their own officers, so that as far as possible they could function normally.

So cookhouse details, hygiene parties, roll calls, and morning physical culture became part of life once again. But if much of the day's work seemed pointless and tedious, and the saluting seemed overdone, it had to be admitted that in other ways our leaders had performed wonders. They had established what came to be known as "Changi University" at which a good range of subjects could be studied under top-class tutors: Agriculture, Business Training, General Education, Engineering, Languages, Law, Medicine, Music, and Science. No fewer than 1,900 students took the Business Principles course, and 120 teachers catered for 2,300 in the Education course.

So high were the qualifications of the tutors and instructors at Changi University, that we were told that any awards and diplomas granted at Changi would be recognized by any outside university. There were Social Reform groups, Play Reading groups, Musical Recital groups, and Religious Discussion groups, as well as extra lectures on a whole range of different subjects. Most of the meetings were held in the various halls, but smaller groups met on the grassy slopes or under the casuarina trees. By going from tree to tree, one could make a stormy passage down the Channel with the Yachtsmen's Club, take a leisurely tour through the waterways of France with the Travel boys, or find oneself caught in a blizzard in the Alps with the Mountain Climbing group.

The other great influence on the morale at Changi was the

Concert Party. Many of the men in the camp had been professional entertainers before the war, and they gradually moulded themselves into a group capable of staging increasingly elaborate plays, farces, variety shows, and concerts. A large garage had been converted into a most convincing theatre, and most of the scenery, costumes, scripts, musical scores, and instruments bore the brand *Made in Changi.* Regardless of the demand made by the Japanese for working parties, the Concert Party was kept together as a group from start to finish. Consequently they acquired a polish and a range that made them top-line entertainers, and it would have been hard to over-estimate their contribution to life at Changi.

Food was not the only item in short supply, as I discovered when I had to visit the camp dentist to have a tooth filled. It turned out that there was no drill, and that any pain-killing drugs were reserved for the hospital. The dentist's improvised instruments of torture were a small hammer and a .303 bullet that had been sharpened to a fine point at the small end. Using the bullet as a punch, he tapped and tapped to flake, or chip away, the decayed enamel. It was a jarring business, and I was relieved when it was over, and I could hop down from the chair and say, "Arigato, Captain-san," to which the dentist, a tall English officer, retorted pleasantly, "And balls to you, too, Sergeant."

Most recollections of this period are of trivia: games of deck tennis on the lawns with Tubby Craig; courses on Bookkeeping and the Theory of Music; lying on the grass in the moonlight listening to *Der Rosenkavalieri* evening meetings where we discussed every subject under the sun and solved the ills of the world; warm nights spent tossing restlessly, watching the lightning flashes on the horizon, and wondering if it could possibly be the flash from naval guns heralding the long-awaited invasion; lectures from medical men who assured us that if we were not released within twelve months we would be either sterile or mad. And dreams of home; dreams of food … dreams of food.…

On one subject, all P.O.W.s, regardless of rank or nationality, fell into two clear and opposite groups. The Optimists, of whom I was a member, never at any stage believed that we would be

prisoners for longer than six months. This was wildly illogical, of course, and was an estimate of the heart rather than the mind. Nevertheless, when our six months* estimate was up and the situation was, if anything, more depressing than ever, we had no hesitation in declaring even more confidently. “Six months at the most.”

On the other hand, the Pessimists (of whom Pross Reid was a foundation member) firmly believed that:

a. We would never be released;
b. in any case, we would be either mad, or sterile, or both;
c. mad, sterile, or both, we would in any case, wind up in the salt mines;
d. we could not hope for release until Malaya was invaded by the British and if an invasion did take place, the Japanese would immediately shoot us!

However, completely typical of the average British outlook was the universal Changi cry of “You’ll never get off the island.” This was a catch phrase coined by Harry Smith—or Happy Harry as he was known to all—who was a comedian with the A.I.F. Concert Party. The news could be without a flicker of hope—the Japanese sweeping through South-East Asia like a scourge and the German Wermacht carrying all before them in Europe—but it only needed Happy Harry to turn his sad melancholy face to the audience and wail, ‘‘You’ll never get off the island” for the whole house to dissolve into helpless hilarity.

If it could be said that “Macbeth hath murdered sleep,” then with equal justice it could have been said in those days that “Nippon hath murdered sex” The semi-starvation, vitamin lacking diet meted out by the Japanese kept most P.O.W.s so debilitated that sex, in deed and in thought, failed to exist. I had always considered myself the normal male and it was with a sense of shock that, during the latter months of Pudu and our stay at Changi, I found in myself certain homosexual tendencies.

There was no desire in the least of a physical nature, but there was the urge for the companionship of one of my fellow men and the desire to be of service and to share all things with him. These thoughts and feelings were kept very carefully to myself and I was gratified and relieved to find that this temporary aberration vanished completely once we resumed the normal, hard P.O.W.

work life some weeks later. Indeed, in all my P.O.W. days, I knew of only one man whom one could reasonably suspect of being homosexual and the Japanese recipe of poor food and hard work certainly eliminated what could have been a considerable problem to some 50,000 womanless young men.

Women and beer were rarely mentioned, and almost never with desire. Our great need—apart from food—was tobacco, and its hold on most of us was almost terrifying. From start to finish the medium and heavy smokers were slaves to the habit and would take incredible risks to buy the weed, or to steal it from the Japanese. When they couldn't get it they smoked tea leaves, rope, dried hibiscus leaves—anything that faintly resembled tobacco. Clothes, presentation watches, and the most precious souvenirs of home, were all sold or swapped for it. Even in the depths of a Japanese winter, emaciated prisoners were still swapping their rice for tobacco.

Despite its undeniable attractions, there were certain features of life at Changi that grated on men used to the fraternal life of Pudu. Black markets had sprung up like weeds, and night after night men "went through the wire" to deal with Chinese traders and to return to camp laden with food and tobacco, which they sold at outrageous prices to their companions. The "traders" admittedly ran a considerable risk, but to the men of Pudu it was completely wrong that profit should be made at the expense of deprived and desperate comrades.

Another unpleasant feature of the camp was that in order to visit our friends in hospital, we had to pass through a check-point guarded by renegade Sikhs who had joined the Japanese-sponsored "Free Indian Army." Heaven only knows what racial hatreds and old scores the Sikhs were paying off, but the fact was that at this stage we feared them more than the Japanese. They were big and powerful men—few were less than six feet tall—and they laid about them with their rifles at the slightest provocation. Often, ironically enough, we had to appeal to the Japanese for protection!

Nevertheless, Changi remained an oasis where, for once, you could study and read and find conversation that was not limited to food and the number of bowel movements made that day. But I was not to ossify in this peaceful backwater for long, and only a

few weeks after our arrival at Changi, Jack McGlone came up with a grin and said, “Guess what? You and I are on a working party to Singapore. ‘We’re supposed to be going to River Valley Camp.”

“Go on,” I replied. “River Valley, eh? That sounds nice.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"NICE," I HAD SAID. …

River Valley camp *was* nice—nice for the millions of frogs and mosquitoes that bred in the turgid smelly stream that trickled through the camp, and nice indeed for the bugs and lice that infested the dilapidated bamboo huts in which we lived. For the P.O.W.s it was anything but nice, although, as in every camp, there came the day when we straightened our backs, wiped our sweaty faces, and muttered, "Oh brother, will I be glad to get home tonight."

For the second time in our brief P.O.W. career, we became a mobile work force. As at Pudu we performed an infinite variety of tasks, although we spent most of our time in the Singapore docks at Keppel Harbour. There we loaded and unloaded ships, and sorted and stacked all kinds of goods the British had left in the go-downs, or warehouses. Writh the surrender of Singapore, the Japanese acquired great riches and loot and, such was the volume, even after nine months the sorting and cataloguing remained unfinished. It was heavy back-breaking work, and was always performed at a frantic pace.

We spent one entire week stacking bags of dried peas in a go-down. The trucks came, the bags of peas—each weighing well over two hundred pounds—were tipped off, and it was our job to stack them. At first, things were not too bad. Four men would each grasp a corner of a bag, lift it, and then place it on your shoulders as you walked underneath. At the stack it was taken from your shoulders by the stackers.

Soon the stacks grew higher—the go-down was forty feet high—and a plank was laid, up which we staggered with rubbery legs. As the stacks grew our task became more difficult, and soon the trucks were arriving before we could clear the space. The Japanese, ridiculously impatient, had the trucks unload further and further from the stack. The last days were a nightmare, in which for ten hours each man had a bag weighing anything up to two hundred and fifty pounds dropped on his shoulders, staggered thirty to forty yards with it, and then tried to ascend an increasingly steep plank that swayed and sagged with the weight.

The struggle up the plank was supervised by a bespectacled little idiot who stood at the bottom and prodded us with a bamboo rod when we faltered half-way. Needless to say, there were handtrucks galore in an adjacent go-down, but these would have spoiled the fun.

Con Chandler, whose heart was much bigger than his body, ought, we decided, to remain a permanent lifter, but after several days he insisted on having a turn as a carrier. “I want to pull my weight and give you blokes a spell,” he said as he came forward to carry a bag. As the four lifters placed the bag on his shoulders, Con’s knees buckled, and he sagged to the ground with a heavy bag of peas on top of him.

Con lay on the ground, winded, but trying manfully to draw breath and curse at the same time. We burst out laughing despite ourselves.

“The —— Japanese —— Empire can jam these —— peas up their —— arse one at a —— time” spluttered Con as he fought for breath. The commotion brought the guards running, but this was the kind of humour that appealed to the Japanese mind, and Con was tapped chidingly on the head for his language, told he was “a baby soldier,” and then given a Kinchi cigarette to soothe his wounded pride. He went back to being a lifter, but for a long time his small figure remained rigid with indignation.

As I came up to take a bag, I asked anxiously, “Nippon presento baby soldier cigarette-ka?”

“You can get stuffed,” said Con fiercely and aimed a savage blow at me with all his 5 ft 3 in. behind it. Then he grinned sheepishly and all was well at Keppel Harbour.

Our one consolation here was that we ate prodigious quantities of dried peas. We ate and ate until hunger was forgotten and our jaws ached. Then later, when we drank heavily to replace our sweat loss, our bellies distended obscenely and the belch and thunder of our wind was an awesome thing and drove our muttering guards from us as though from a plague.

Once again we marched through the streets to work, and once more became part of a big city. Singapore, even then, was an exciting place in which to be. The streets were still teeming with life and colour, though the city was much dirtier than it used to be, and business was slowly grinding to a halt for lack of

commodities to buy and sell. Almost every day another shop would close its doors, and it was little wonder that many Chinese traders turned to the P.O.W.s for barter and profit. We did our best to oblige, and stealing was just as widespread as at Pudu, but often on a far larger scale.

Many a man found in himself unsuspected talents for larceny and trading, and—taking advantage of the fact that the I.J.A. had still not completely checked their assets—sold goods to the Chinese by the truckload. This type of theft demanded cold-blooded bluffing and split-second timing. I lacked the nerve required to be a big operator, but I often helped to create a diversion to distract the guards while a coup was being effected.

A favourite ruse was to bring a dead snake to the go-down. At an appointed time a shout of "Snake, snake" would be raised, and we would all begin frantically searching under bales and boxes. Invariably the guards would join in, and when the act had been prolonged to its limit, one of us would indulge in a frenzy of blows and shouts and emerge triumphantly with the snake. By the time the guards had inspected and admired the "kill," the goods had been whisked into a truck and away.

Sometimes the guards asked if they could keep the snake to have watch bands and belts made from the skin, and then rewarded as with cigarettes for our bravery in the hunt. One returned to camp with a positive glow: happy to have been associated with an operation in which *everyone* was happy (except possibly the snake).

One day in December, twelve of us were marched to a store crammed with bolts of cloth and khaki drill. Our little guard of the day was a pleasant and unassuming Two Star Private named Ito, who explained that we were to make shirts for the Japanese Army. This was most interesting, as the party had been selected at random and none of us had the slightest knowledge of tailoring. Nor had Ito, but he made it very plain to us that he had been told to make shirts, and his Sergeant would be very cross indeed unless his orders were obeyed.

We looked at each other helplessly, but Ito, with the Japanese flair for improvisation, took off his shirt, unpicked every stitch, laid the pieces on the table, and there was our pattern.

Full of admiration for such brilliance, we entered into the spirit

of the game. Some of us traced out patterns on the khaki drill, then cut them out. Others threaded needles and sewed the pieces together with results that reduced us all, including Ito, to whoops of laughter. Surprisingly enough, by the end of the day we had a pile of one size, collarless shirts that looked almost reasonable.

Certainly Ito was not slapped by his Sergeant, although in typically Japanese style another guard with a fresh batch of prisoners was selected for the shirt-making detail.

Another screwball detail came a week later when six of us were detached from the morning parade and hustled into a truck. The Three Star Private in charge told us that the day's duty was to tune pianos in the officers' brothels. (Why the pianos, we wondered, entranced.) Needless to say, not one of us, including our oriental leader, had the foggiest notion of how to tune a piano. However, we were told, not entirely to our surprise, that the Sergeant would be very cross indeed if the pianos were not tuned.

So we went to four brothels armed with screwdrivers, pliers, and piano wire; we tightened and loosened the adjustments until we had a sound that, to quote one of the party, "sounds all right to the naked ear."

The brothels were surprisingly attractive. They boasted fresh-smelling tatami mats for flooring, sliding parchment doors, a few cushions scattered tastefully around, and an occasional finely drawn scroll as the only ornament of any kind. The pianos provided the only incongruous note, and, after our visit, the notes were more jarring than ever.

By this time it had become painfully apparent that we had little in common with our captors, and that time was not bringing understanding and mutual respect. Our outlooks were poles apart, and our ways of life were totally different.

The Japanese despised us for surrendering, and had mentally relegated us to the status of work animals. To their surprise and anger we despicable creatures were never humble. In fact we were infuriatingly arrogant. No matter how grim the news and how convincing the Japanese victories, not one prisoner ever doubted that we would eventually win the war, and this conviction showed itself in a hundred ways. I have seen Japanese officers beside themselves with frustration as they tried, with

maps and diagrams, to get it into our thick heads that the war was *last.* But it was always dangerous to become involved in discussion about it, and I always contented myself with murmuring, “Mati, mati” (wait, wait).

Few of us understood the Japanese obsession with “face,” and this fact also caused much friction. Time after time we found the Japanese behaviour inexplicable: they could break promises without shame, and often denied actions that we had seen take place only minutes before. At River Valley, a Japanese knocked an Australian unconscious for not bowing deeply enough when passing. A complaint was made to the Camp Commandant, who came to the scene, spoke briefly to his guard, and then said flatly, “No one has been struck.” The fact that the Australian still lay unconscious in front of them did not perturb them in the least. It was only later that we realized it was unthinkable for a Japanese to admit any action that would cause loss of face, particularly in front of lowly prisoners of war.

We were also unaware of their customs and superstitions and often offended through ignorance. For example, when I learnt to count in Japanese, I was taught (by Japanese) to count *ichiy, ni, san, chi*—one, two, three, four. Several times subsequently I was inexplicably slapped after using the word *chi* and it later transpired that *chi* also denotes death and that many Japanese believe that anyone using the word is putting the “evil eye” on them. Many Japanese used the word *yong* for the number four in order to avoid the superstitious connection.

In spite of their capacity for lying, their strange customs, and their barbarity, the Japanese are in many ways a very polite race, and they were deeply offended when we swore (the Japanese language contains no swear words), or when we—again through ignorance—failed to add the deferential *san* to their names. Another trap for us lay in their different forms of address. Since we learnt all our Japanese from our guards, we naturally spoke to them the way they spoke to us—using the form of address reserved for inferiors. They misconstrued this as just another example of “the proud British soldier.”

We fiercely resented the Japanese habit of punishing by blows and beatings, but it did not seem quite so bad when we realized that corporal punishment was normal throughout the I.J.A. It was

quite normal for officers to beat up N.C.O.s with fists, sticks, or swords, and for N.C.O.s to beat up Privates. It was not uncommon for the unlucky recipient to be left unconscious after such treatment.

Unfortunately for us, the poor little One Star Recruit had only one group he could beat up, and it was a fact that many beatings we received happened only because some battered Jap wanted to restore "face" by belting a few prisoners of war. This was particularly noticeable later on when we met the Koreans, whom the Japanese treated abominably. The Korean, no matter how fine a soldier he was and how many years of service he had given, could never hold rank in the Japanese Army, and could be beaten up by the lowliest One Star Private.

The Japanese also had quite a complex about their lack of height, and it was noticeable that when a whole group was involved they invariably selected the tallest men for punishment. They saw nothing incongruous in standing on a stone or a box in order to hit the prisoner about the face and head.

For all their savagery and disregard of human life, they had a sincere love of family life and never failed to show interest in whether you were married and how many children you had. I learnt very early that the Japanese were much more lenient towards family men, and when among a pile of dead men's mementos I came across a photo of a snowy-haired little boy of about three on a bicycle, I promptly adopted him as my "son." Over the years, I showed the photo of Teddy Harrison to hundreds of Japanese, and invariably gained their attention and hisses of admiration. Many replied by producing photos of little black-eyed, round-faced, solemn Japanese children who were quite delightful.

We did back-breaking work on the wharves; we rolled eighty-gallon drums of oil until we were blinded by sweat, and we stacked bombs each weighing two hundred and fifty pounds. Our skins became dry and scaly, and the few pounds gained at Changi melted away despite the extra ration of four ounces of meat a day provided by a benevolent and appreciative I.J.A. We came to call River Valley "home," and to bless the evenings when we crawled back to camp, took our bags and blankets out of the bug-infested huts, and slept under the brilliant stars.

With superb timing, the Japanese waited until sheer fatigue was making us very inferior workers indeed and then, disgusted with our efforts, said, “Changey, changey, speedo.” We accepted their view that we were “no-good workers” with the greatest goodwill in the world. Our parting gesture, on the last night, was to gather bugs by the hundred and carefully release them at the back of the guardhouse. We felt quite sure that the bugs would be much more at home there.

We resumed life at Changi with sighs of relief that came straight from the heart and more and more we came to appreciate what an oasis of peace and sanity it was. In its freedom from sight or sound of the monstrous Japanese, Changi must have been almost unique in South-East Asia, somewhat like a jewel sparkling in the mud.

We picked up the threads, resumed our studies, joined discussion groups, and played thousands of hands of bridge which the A.I.F. had taken up as a universal pastime. I tried writing poetry as an exercise and sweated away at a monstrosity in iambic pentameters (the metre of Shakespeare, if you please) which was to express my dismay at the manner in which the years were slipping from me. (I was twenty-four.) Unfortunately for this particular epic—but luckily for my friends—I happened on these lines of John Milton:

> “How soon hath Tyme, the suttle thief of Youth, Stol’n on
> his wing my three and twentieth yeare.”

Unwilling to try and top Milton, I abandoned that theme and turned instead to a sonnet inspired by the death of Toby Henry. I had written several trite sentiments trying, with neither grace nor talent, to transmute emotion into verse, when I read the ancient words of King David, “Know ye not that a Prince and a great man hath fallen this day?” As if that was not enough to show up my gauche efforts, it was only a few days later that I came across Cory’s poem, “Heraclitus” which begins:

> “They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
> They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to
> shed.”

After that I tore up my masterpieces of trite doggerel, stopped looking soulful, and abandoned forever my career as a poet.

There were several secret radios operating at Changi, and it

was through them that we found out what the reaction to General Gordon Bennett's escape from Singapore had been. To most of us it seemed incredible that it should have been so bitter, for he had taken no advantage of his rank, and had set a fine example of courage and initiative. However, many of our officers were vehement that he should have stayed in Singapore. Certainly the coldness with which he was received made us wonder how we would be received after the war, especially since we ourselves were not particularly proud of our performance.

One day we were amazed to see the 2/30th Battalion (our old friends from Gemas) marching up and down with dummy rifles. They had been ordered by their C.O. to commence drilling again. None of the exercises were carried out with any particular secrecy, and the Japanese, who were not altogether stupid, and who in any case had Indonesian informers among us, acted promptly. Searches were made for radios, because the Japanese realized that only favourable news—which had at last begun to brighten the gloom—could have encouraged our leaders to make such a provocative gesture. Suspected radio operators were seized and taken to Kempei Tai headquarters where they were questioned and punished very severely. Immediately afterwards the Japanese announced a general tightening of discipline and let it be known that they intended to take a more active role in the administration of Changi. In the meantime, as a tangible sign of their displeasure, they ordered all playing of the National Anthem to cease.

We had hardly got over this excitement when a party of five thousand were detailed to leave for Thailand. First reports from the Japanese indicated that the party was to be taken to newly constructed "rest" camps, in a land where rice was grown in abundance and the natives enjoyed the highest standard of living in Asia.

The party, which included 2,242 Australians, was known as "D" Force. Normally a force of this size, going into a strange country for an indefinite period, would be completely fitted out with clothing, medicine, and other essential equipment. The Japanese, considerately taking into account that we would have to carry all we possessed, gave us nothing.

The day of our departure from Changi was 15 March 1943. The

A.I.F. party paraded on Selarang Barracks Square in the morning and were treated to a farewell speech by Lt-Col. Galleghan before being handed over to the waiting Japanese guards. We in the back row heard very little, as the task of making himself audible to 2,240 men was beyond even one as magnificently equipped as the Commanding Officer of the 2/30th Battalion. We did, however, catch several shouted references to, “little yellow bastards” and to the claim that, “the only good Jap is a dead Jap.”

Somewhat startled, I looked around at the guards only a few feet behind us. It was certain that they were well within hearing range, but, to our relief, they stared ahead impassively and leaned on their rifles in obvious boredom. I looked across at Dick Rosser on my left and raised my eyebrows in surprise. Dick, sturdy framed and open faced, smiled, “Black Jack is certainly in form today, all right.” I replied a trifle sourly, “I could talk tough too, if I were staying in Changi like he is.”

Bombardier Dick Herring, on my right, said seriously, “Ah, I don’t know. I’ve heard Thailand called the Rice Bowl of the East. Well be okay.”

It was just another conversation in a prison camp but none of us knew that the journey about to commence would take us back into the Dark Ages … complete with slavery and plague. There was to come a day when, out of the hundred or so men from the Fourth Anti-Tank Regiment, one man only was to fall in for the day’s work on the Death Railway. The others would be either dead, or dying, or caricatures of men lying in what passed for “hospitals.” The one man to parade on that last day was Dick Rosser.

And Dick Herring who thought we would be okay. Within a few months, gallant little Dickie Herring was to vomit away his life in my arms.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE BATCH OF a thousand men who lined up on the Singapore Railway Station on 15 March 1943 must have been the scruffiest lot ever to grace the main railway station of a major city. We carried every item we possessed—clothing, bedding, toilet articles, and personal possessions.

Drawn up at the station and baking in the hot sun was the long line of goods trucks that were to take us to Thailand. These trucks, usually reserved for rice transport, were eighteen feet long and eight feet wide. They had heavy sliding doors in the centre, but there was no ventilation, and no provision for toilet or washing facilities.

The Japanese, revelling in the opportunity of displaying their power to the watching natives, counted us over and over and finally gave the order for us to embark. This brought a chorus of incredulous laughter from the P.O.W.s, for it seemed impossible that they could expect thirty-two men and their gear to cram into each truck. Once again we had underestimated our oriental friends who, with kicks and shouts, demonstrated that where there is a will there is a way. We found that the only way we could fit, was either by all standing up, or by sitting with our knees drawn up. The discomfort was increased by the presence in each truck of a Japanese guard, who naturally took more than his share of space.

So began a journey lasting five days and four nights. Once a day a halt was made, during which we were given two rations of rice and one pint of water. This was also our sole opportunity of attending to the demands of Nature. In the stifling heat of our mobile Turkish Baths few had much appetite, but the one pint of water a day was woefully inadequate, and our tongues became thick and raspy. By day the sweat poured from us in rivulets, and the hot metal sides of the trucks burnt our bare bodies. By night the trucks became ice boxes in which we shivered as the cool air came through the door, which had to be left open for ventilation.

Slowly we crawled up the west coast of Malaya, passing through familiar towns and villages … Gemas, Tampin, Kuala Lumpur.…

Often we were shunted to sidings and, bereft of the air created by our motion, sat panting in our hot metal boxes for hours while the important traffic thundered by. “We came to Prai by night and across the moonlit sea we saw the lights of beautiful Penang twinkling like so many fairy lanterns. Then came Sungei Patani and Alor Star and soon after, with a sense of excitement, we realized that we were in Thailand—Land of the Free.

If the journey was a thirsty and tedious one, it had its compensations. In the cramped, stifling conditions the behaviour of our troops was exemplary. There were complaints and curses, of course, but they were spiced with humour, and extra space and water were willingly given to men suffering badly from malaria.

The scenery was always interesting and often magnificent. We saw the silent and awesome jungles of Malaya; the orderly rubber plantations and the graceful coconut palms; the peaceful villages; water buffalos wallowing in the mud; colourful birds and flame trees; the eternal peasant behind his primitive wooden plough, gazing with wonder at the white tuans who were now coolies. At night we saw the sky studded with stars unbelievably thick and bright, and as we crossed the Isthmus of Kra, we saw in the moonlight the blue waters of the Gulf of Siam creaming on lonely golden sands.

At dawn of our first day in Siam, we thrilled to see a white temple high on a mountain peak, half hidden by the morning mist and as hauntingly beautiful as a faintly heard Viennese waltz. Through the door of our swaying train we saw the East and we saw Life. It was adventure, and, despite everything, a part of me exulted that I was there.

Twelve hundred miles and a hundred and ten hours from Singapore we emerged stiffly from the womb of our iron centipede and lined up on the Bampong platform to be searched.

“Sweet shades of Ned Kelly,” Colin Finkemeyer exclaimed bitterly. “Do the silly bastards think we’ve prised a few rivets from their rusty bloody trucks?”

As it happened, Finky had done our fellow highwaymen less than justice, for it seemed that in the confusion at the last meal stop, someone had appropriated a kit of tools belonging to the engine driver.

“Gorshu (Australia) no goodera,” snarled our guards. “Steal,

steal, all the time."

However, in the hot sun, the task of searching a thousand men and their motley gear proved an exasperating business and, by the time they got to the end of the line, the Japanese contented themselves with a few bad-tempered kicks at our gear. We then mounted a string of flat open rail cars and set off for Kanchanaburi, an ancient walled city of Siam, some twenty miles further north. It was usually called Kanburi.

When we eventually disembarked we found ourselves in a flat, very lightly timbered area. Looking about us curiously, we saw groups of P.O.W.s gathered round fires cooking and boiling. It looked like a picnic in full swing. Spotting a familiar figure at one of the fires, we walked over and asked, "Hi, Lofty, what's the drill? What goes on?" Lofty Reeves, a New South Wales infantryman, looked up and grinned. "Search me, Sarge. We got here yesterday and haven't seen a bloody Jap since."

A weakness of the Japanese Army was that the ordinary soldier was never encouraged to think for himself; his job was merely to obey orders. Therefore, when our escorts delivered us to Kanburi as instructed, it was no concern of theirs that nobody had expected our arrival.

For exactly five days we stayed there without any control from the Japanese. The local Thais, slim brown men and born traders, were eager to buy whatever we would sell, and a brisk trade was carried out in clothing, watches, rings, knives, etc. With the ticals and bahats thus obtained we bought eggs, chickens, bananas, flour, coffee, and gula malacca (a treacle-ish type of sugar). Cooking went on nonstop. This food was cheap and plentiful, and all day and far into the night, we cooked and yarned over flickering fires, then slept contentedly until the next meal. After a few days, some of the keener Thais set up stalls in the "camp." It was an extraordinary scene.

There were plenty of Japanese troops in the area, but beyond curious glances, they displayed little interest in us. When they passed we smiled amiably, and received somewhat uncertain smiles in reply.

On the fifth day, a young Japanese officer came to where we were grouped near a fire playing cards. Anxious that no incident should occur to disturb our idyll, I shouted "Kiotski," and we

scrambled to our feet, stood to attention, and saluted. The officer smiled, obviously pleased at our reaction.

"You shoko-ka?" he asked, pointing at me.

"Nei," I replied modestly, "Wa-takushiwa gunso." (I am a Sergeant, not an officer.)

He nodded wisely and asked, "All men worku?"

This was an awkward question and my mind failed to produce a convincing answer.

Fortunately blond George Dixon stepped into the breach and said smoothly, "Hei. All men number one joto workers. Nippon presento yasume." Roughly translated, this meant, "Because we are such splendid workers Nippon has given us a holiday!"

The officer took one look at George's open, ingenuous face and accepted this outrageous statement with a pleased smile and a hiss of "Ah, so-ka."

Collecting my scattered wits, I hastily shouted "Kiotski" again, and he returned our salute with a bow, and departed, tripping over his long sword.

Just how long we could have gone on supporting ourselves in this manner will never be known, for after five days of gargantuan feasting our peace was shattered by the arrival of some particularly ill-tempered guards, who shouted that our five-day holiday had been a mistake and that we would work particularly hard to make up for it. As it happened, it took them a day and a half to round up the entire party from the surrounding countryside, and our life of ease continued until we were all present.

We learnt that our task was to build a railway between Bampong in Thailand and Thanbyuzayat in Burma. With this completed the Japanese would have a line extending from Singapore to Moulmein. We surveyed the rugged mountains that lay between us and Burma, and looked at each other incredulously.

"Holy cow," Lieutenant Charles Fotheringham exclaimed. "They can't be serious."

"Why not, sir?" Jimmy Cozens asked.

Fotheringham smiled grimly. "I wouldn't want to frighten you gallant people, but the fact is that this railway has been surveyed

by the French and the British and umpteen other nations, and each time the project has been abandoned quick smart."

"But why, sir?" All eyes were turned to the Lieutenant.

"Take your pick, chaps," he said generously. "Diseases such as malaria, typhus, and cholera, plus mountains and rivers that can't be crossed.... Oh, yes. The monsoons wash away any road that *might* exist, and of course they flood the rivers so that even the barges can't get up-country. Apart from that, it's said to be quite a pretty country...."

It just wasn't our day for good news. That afternoon we learnt that the line would be constructed under the direction of the Ninth Japanese Southern Railway Corps. With a shiver of apprehension, we recalled our last encounter with the Japanese Engineers. To make the day complete, we were introduced to the Koreans, big, slab-faced, unintelligent men who took out on us the humiliation the Japanese had heaped on them. Try as we might, we were never able to establish any real contact with them and when it came to physical punishment, we feared them far more than the Japanese. They were bigger, just as brutal, and they knew how to hit.

Basically, our task was to build a reasonably level strip, fifty feet wide, from one end of Thailand to the other. This involved clearing trees and rocks from the level spaces, building up embankments in the low-lying areas, digging cuttings through the mountains, and constructing bridges. This last was a dangerous undertaking.

In general, the railway line was to follow very close to the path of the Menam Kwa Noi (Mother of the waters), a mighty river that ran from Burma down the length of Thailand until it finally spewed itself into the Gulf of Siam. As the works camps were always sited close to the river, our water and transport problems were vastly simplified.

The magnificent Menam Kwa Noi was to soothe and bathe our wounds, provide us with priceless drinking and cooking water, and—bring disease and horrible death.

Our work in Thailand opened on a hectic note. We marched to a low-lying area where, high above our heads, like spindly, overgrown soccer goalposts, towered bamboo poles with crossbars forty-five feet from the ground. To our pained surprise

we discovered that we were to build an embankment level with the crossbars, and that the work was to be completed in fourteen days.

Our method of building an embankment was primitive. We simply removed earth from each side of the fifty-foot strip and dumped it on the site of the line. We worked in groups of three: one shovelled the earth, and the others carted it to the embankment on stretchers improvised from two bamboo poles and a rice sack.

Thus we toiled for fourteen days in simple slavery. Night shift was introduced and the carbide lamps and huge bamboo fires made sweaty bodies glisten as we toiled like so many ants up the soft, steadily growing embankment. The sounds of blows and angry shouts desecrated the warm beautiful night.

The last shift was kept on the job until the work was completed and then, after twenty-six hours continuous labour, we were allowed to return to camp, half carrying the many who were literally out on their feet.

By comparison with the frantic days spent on the embankment, our next task was almost pleasant; it involved only the clearing of a stretch of line in flattish country. We camped on a pebbly beach alongside the river, and it didn't matter that we had no tents. Work was light and the guards, following the example set by the Camp Commandant, Lieutenant Kumi, were reasonable.

Kumi was kindly, almost gentle in manner, and often spoke to us in his halting English, explaining apologetically, "Nippon slaps, but Nippon also gets slapped." He told us about one day when he was still training. He had made a mistake in sending a signal to a group of men on top of a mountain. His punishment was to run up the mountain to the outpost, where every man slapped him soundly, and then run down again to be slapped by his officer. Kumi considered this punishment to be quite fair and said seriously, "In war, my mistake costs their life."

On our last night at Pebbly Beach, some of the boys started an impromptu concert and were later joined by Kumi and two of the guards. For a few hours Japanese and Australians shared a rare spirit of comradeship. It was a memory to which we clung, for from this night on we were to know little peace of mind in Thailand.

The next day, with health and optimism considerably restored, we marched steadily north, staying overnight at staging camps. The marches were long and hot. We were carrying everything we owned, and gradually the dusty track became littered with an assortment of items reluctantly jettisoned from packs that became heavier with every thirsty mile.

An infantryman ahead of us was burdened with enough books to form a mobile library, but as his legs grew leaden and the straps cut deeper, his classics were subjected to an agonizing appraisal and abandoned one by one. Soon Scott, Fitzgerald, Plato, Donne, and Shakespeare formed sad, cultured milestones in our wake.

We came to Tarsau camp and saw the first ominous portends of what could be. The high bamboo fence and the working elephants gave the camp an almost romantic air from outside, but within the camp all was dismal and foreboding. Grey beaten scarecrows of men, scrufiily bearded and with festering sores on unwashed bodies; men living like troglodytes in dark, bug-ridden huts; smelly foul latrines, hospital huts with living dead staring lacklustre into a twilight world of their own; an air of gloom and depression; never a smile; never, never, a laugh.

An elderly, grey-haired English officer sat holding one of his testicles which was swollen to the size of a boy's football. Tubes led from it into a bowl.

"Good Lord, what on earth had caused that?" we asked the hospital orderly.

"Beriberi, mate," he replied. "We all get it in one form or another, but when the fluid gets to the heart or the balls, you've had it. We're draining this chap but he's a goner, take my word for it."

We walked away with pity in our hearts for this gentle, dignified man, but for the others—the grey Dutch and English with the dirty bodies and the listless air—we felt only a mild contempt that their morale should fall so low.

We were soon to understand.…

At another staging camp we were allowed to sleep in unusually new tents, and before long it was observed that the "drop" of the tent—the twenty-four-inch flap that ran around the bottom—was not really essential; it was further noted that it would make

splendid material for shorts. Length after length was hacked off, taken to Colonel McPherson (who was a tailor by trade), and made into sturdy shorts. In the search next morning the guards rather amazingly failed to notice that many who had arrived in G-strings were leaving in shorts.

We passed Konyu River camp and came at midday to a low-lying featureless stretch of lightly timbered ground. “All men make campu,” the guards grunted. This was to be the site of our permanent work camp, and we were allowed exactly one afternoon to build it. It was to become notorious as Konyu 3. The date was 25 April 1943.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALL AFTERNOON AND evening we cleared trees, and hacked down bamboo to build a cookhouse, or to split for flooring of the tents. We dug shallow drains and deep latrines. Konyu 3—or K3 as it became known—was several miles from the river, and our only source of water was a shallow stream, no more than three feet wide, that passed through the Japanese camp before reaching us.

There were only half enough tents to go round and each sixteen men were given either an inner tent, or the outer fly. Even then, some men had to sleep with only their heads and shoulders under cover, but, as neither part of the tent was waterproof without the other, no one worried greatly. In any case, the Old Man with the Scythe was soon to take care of our overcrowding.

It was announced by the Japanese that work would commence next morning, and that officers would not be permitted to accompany us on the work. This sounded ominous, and we guessed correctly that an exceptional effort was to be required and that the Japanese wanted no interference from men whose rank entitled them to respect.

At first light of dawn next day we lined up to meet our new masters, the Engineers for whom we would work all the time we were in this camp. I was in charge of a squad of forty men and as we waited to see what oriental prize fate would bestow upon us, George Dickie groaned, “I’ll have to go to the benjo, Sarge.” “Bugger it all, George, can’t it wait?” I protested. “No,” said George with a contorted face. “I’m desperate,” and behind him another voice said, “Me too!”

With considerable bad grace I sent them off and hardly had they left to squat on the bamboo poles laid across the deep trenches, than the Lord and Master of our squad hove into sight. And what a treasure we had drawn! Intelligent, brutal, trigger-tempered, tall, and strongly built and with eyes that flashed readily behind thick glasses, First Class Private Ichinoi was a man to inspire fear into hearts much stouter than mine.

He came up briskly as I stood in front of the squad, and without the slightest preliminaries barked, “Yong-ju mai-ka?” “San-ju-hachi,” I replied. “Ni mai benjo.” (Thirty-eight men—two

at the latrines.) “Ni mai benjo?” echoed Ichinoi incredulously with eyes glaring, and within twenty seconds of meeting him, I was picking myself up out of the dust, tasting my blood, and wishing that I too had gone to the benjo.

For almost six months Ichinoi was to be the literal master of life and death to our squad, and I was to act as his right-hand man. I came to know him exceedingly well, to cultivate his friendship from expediency, and to win his trust to a limited degree. But always I feared the insane glare that came into his eyes, and I treated him with the respect given to a dangerous and unpredictable beast. And after the war was over, I did my best to have him hung.

We marched through the light jungle behind our guards and emerged to find ourselves almost at the top of a mountain that commanded a magnificent view westward. Below us, the mountain fell away quite sheer to a valley in which, like a silver ribbon at this height, was the Menan Kwa Noi. Further over again we saw clearly the rugged hills of Burma.

With a whistle of incredulity and dismay, we learnt that we were to make a cutting eight feet deep into this rocky mountain. The primitive tools and earth-carrying stretchers were issued immediately and we commenced work on the six hundred-yard cutting that was to become the most infamous section of the railway—Hellfire Pass!

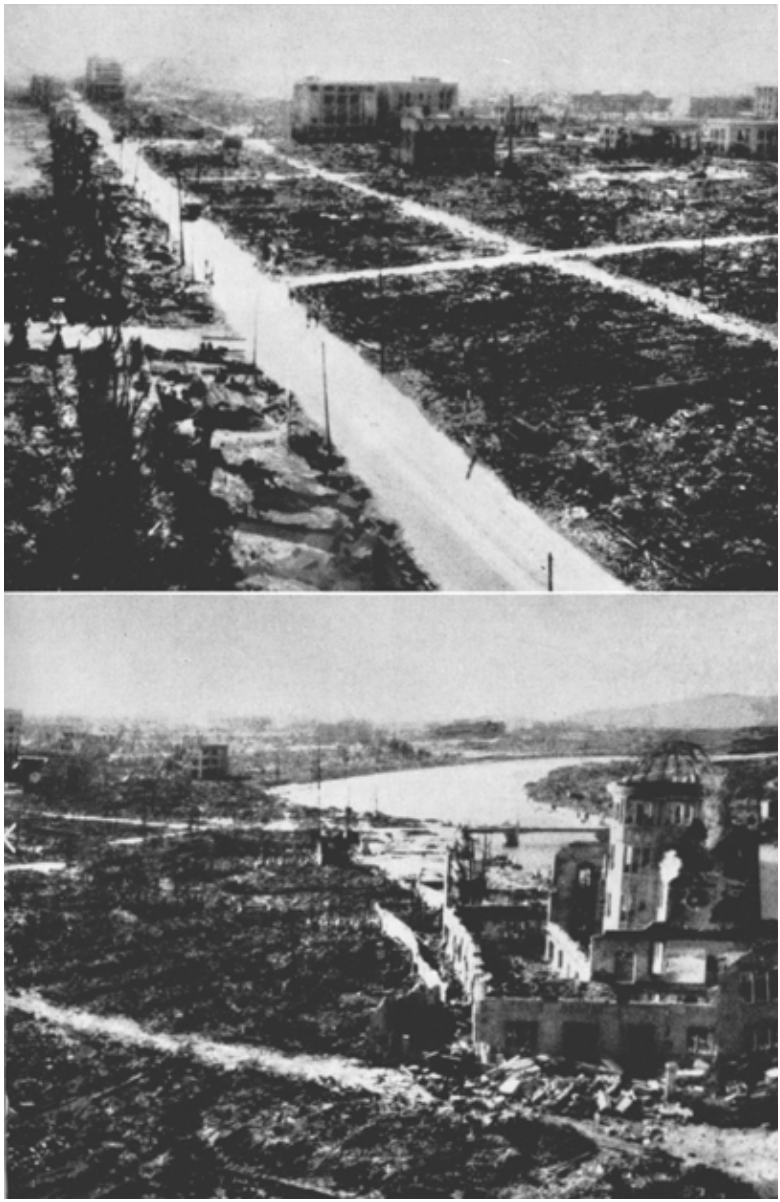
During the first weeks the work was hard but reasonable. We worked long hours, but there was actually a full hour’s break at midday, and because we were clearing soft earth, progress was rapid. The Japanese never at any stage recognized Saturdays or Sundays, but during the early weeks of K3, every tenth day was a “yasume,” or rest day.

But then our shovels began to clang against solid, granitelike rock, our progress slowed, and the position changed abruptly. We were in the hot seat. The line was being pushed towards us fast from both sides, and it became apparent that our section could hold up the entire project. Hence, a great “speedo” was ordered and the fun began.

We arose in the dark, stumbled over to the cookhouse fires, and ate our mug of “pap” (saltless, sugarless ground rice). As the first light of dawn streaked the sky we were counted and marched off

some five hundred yards through the jungle to the cutting. The primitive tools were issued as we arrived and within minutes all were hard at work, and stayed that way until six in the evening. The midday break—when we ate the rice drawn that morning and now sour from the six hours in a warmish dixie—was cut down to thirty minutes.

The work was divided into three groups—the earth-moving gangs, who cleared the earth and rubble to expose



(Top) Ruins of Hiroshima a month after the bombing. Fukuya department Store at the left; the large building in the centre is the Hiroshima Bank.

(Bottom) The hypo centre, indicated by the white cross at the left, and the Industrial Promotion Hall, which has been preserved as a memorial.

(Top) Looking across devastated Hiroshima towards Yokogatva.

(Bottom) Gokoku Shrine and Hiroshima Castle.

the rocks; the “hammer and tap” men, who hammered deep holes into the rocks to allow gelignite sticks to be inserted; and finally,

the rock rollers, who cleared the rocks and boulders cracked open by the explosive charge.

The hammer and tap men had probably the most unenviable job. Armed with an eight-pounder hammer and a long, chisel-headed drill, their task was to hammer the drill into solid rock until they had made a hole one metre deep. Two men formed a team—one to swing the hammer, and the other to sit with the drill between his legs, lifting and turning the drill slightly after each blow. It was hardly a game for wandering thoughts for one poorly directed blow could smash fingers, or send steel flying into the eyes of the man who held the drill. Once you caught the rhythm of swinging the hammer, it became a mechanical action, but I was glad enough not to be a hammer and tap man.

I was in charge of the rock rollers, and although the work was hard and dangerous, it certainly held more interest and variety than the other types of work. After the gelignite had been exploded to crack open the huge boulders, and the hammer and tap men had gone on to the next section, we would move in with crowbars to clear the area. There was considerable skill needed to prise out some of the huge rocks, and we often spent as long as two hours on the big ones.

It was always exhilarating to have a great rock—many times larger than ourselves—poised delicately, ready to start its fearless charge into the valley below. There would be a last check to ensure that the line was clear, a nod, and then at a slight push the rock would leave us—reluctantly at first, turning over and over as if in slow motion, but then, as momentum gathered, leaping in joyous bounds until it crashed and lost itself in the trees far below. And often in the hush that followed its thunderous passage, we would hear a scream of rage and defiance from the baboons below.

The pressure increased as the solid rock was encountered, and the Japanese and Koreans—not much happier than ourselves with K3 and its cutting—embarked on a fantastic reign of terror. Orders had been received that the cutting *must* be completed by September at all costs, and their latent cruelty and sadism were given free licence. Beatings and slappings were commonplace, but now each guard tried to outdo his fellows in ingenuity.

Ichinoi, to give him his due, had no special weapon and would

democratically hit with the nearest object—shovel, bamboo rod, or crowbar. Others, entirely lacking the high principles of Ichinoi, started to distinguish themselves with individual "trade marks." One carried a pick-handle; another a length of knotted atap that cut and scratched where it hit; another found a length of fencing wire most effective in encouraging maximum efforts; inevitably his fellow guard went one better and nailed a length of barbed wire to a metre stick.

Another—and he frightened us as much as any of them—carried a large saw for the purposes of chastisement and encouragement. In his more benevolent moments he would strike with the flat of the saw, but when irritated he would use the blunt edge, or, if highly offended, the cutting edge. Invariably the head and face were the targets.

Most of the guards were known by nicknames and few will ever forget Blue Sox, the Pig, the Black Bastard, the Undertaker, the Black Prince, the Tiger, Battlegong, the Mad Mongrel, the Turd, Blood and Slime, and the Maggot. In many cases I tried to discover actual names, for even then revenge and retribution were in my mind.

Ichinoi's fellow slave master in charge of the rock-rolling group was in many ways the most feared of them all. Dreaded by all and known as the "Silent Basher" First Class Private Hazama was darker than the usual Japanese and was of slim medium height. For hours on end, Hazama would squat like a great cat on the rocks above us, and always, sooner or later, would come the selection of a man for punishment. Hazama seldom spoke and one of his little foibles was that he relished an *hors-d'oeuvre,* as it were, before the real punishment began.

Usually the victim was placed so that he looked directly at the harsh sun, and was made to hold a rock or a crowbar above his head, or at arm's length. While the ordeal lasted Hazama would survey the prisoner mildly with his impassive face and sad eyes, but when endurance failed and the rock or crowbar sagged, he would administer a frightful beating without pity or passion.

Soon the deaths began, and no matter what the prime cause—malaria, dysentery, beriberi, etc—Captain Parker, the camp Medical Officer, always added, "and malnutrition." During the early days long queues had formed to attend sick parade, but we

soon realized that Dick Parker had little to give beyond advice, and was only permitted to mark men as “unfit for work” if they were desperately ill. Parker gave us skill, untiring effort, and affection, but relief from the slow death of the cutting he could not provide.

At first our dead were carried back to Konyu River camp by volunteers, dog tired after their long day in the cutting. Strangely enough, there was never a shortage of volunteers, for some would willingly perform this last duty for a friend and others would go because the bodies were light and the barges at Konyu could always be raided for pumpkins and tobacco.

The death rate increased and soon we acquired our own cemetery. At first the officers dug the graves during the day, but later they were unable to cope, and grave-digging became yet another chore for weary men after the day’s work.

Still the demands on us grew greater and life resolved itself into a blur of heat and work, of beatings and exhaustion. My boots fell apart, and for the next eighteen months I went barefoot. My shorts gave up the ghost and my sole article of cover became a six-inch wide length of cloth worn fore and aft and held in place by a piece of cord. In the cutting the scene became completely fantastic. Men toiled and sweated and were driven mercilessly. Men were flogged and men collapsed. Officers came from Tokyo itself to see the reason for the hold-up, and at the sight of these god-like beings, the Japanese and Koreans threw themselves into a frenzy of efficiency and terrorism. Men were battered. Limbs were broken. Men died.

Ichinoi shouted to a young Englishman to bring a crowbar. The slight, fair-haired boy misunderstood him and picked up a shovel instead. With a snarl of “Buggero, damme damme,” Ichinoi picked up a crowbar and swung it like a baseball bat. The heavy iron bar hit the boy on the upper arm with a horrid sound and, when he picked himself up, his arm hung twisted in an odd angle.

The bandy-legged horror known as “The Maggot” hit an Englishman on the ear with his clenched fist and burst the ear drum. A lesser man might have been appalled, but the Maggot was made of sterner stuff and walloped hundreds of us on the ear, hoping wistfully to repeat his coup.

Now the men of the Fourth Anti-Tank Regiment began to die.

George Atkins, “Sniper” Emerson, Frank Bryan, Tommy Cahill. From the ration carriers we learnt that Jim Foley, Ted Gamble, and Ernie King had died in near-by camps. Malaria, dysentery, beriberi … and malnutrition. Beaten to death. Starved to death.

The cutting grew deeper, and now the heat bounced back at us from the rock face at our rear. Working hours were lengthened until we rose in the dark and returned to camp in the dark. Yasume days were abolished, and we came to bless the attacks of malaria that, with luck, gained us one or two days away from the cutting. The engineers bullied and bashed in an ecstasy of violence. Seldom a day passed that Ichinoi did not beat at least one man severely.

Hazama began to punish, not for faults, but as a grim example. Every morning he would squat menacingly on the rocks while under him every head was bent and every man worked without pause. But no matter how the sweat ran, or how untiring the effort, sooner or later and as sure as death, the gesture would come that indicated a new victim. The man indicated would stumble up with an ashen face knowing that he would face a period of cat and mouse torture and then, almost certainly, a rare old beating. If the man’s endurance in holding the rock was disappointing, Hazama, a true artist, often ended his performance with a *tour de force*—a careful placement of the groggy prisoner so that a final smashing blow would send him rolling awkwardly down the slope.

On the other hand, men who held their weights for long periods were sometimes sent back to work without even a slap. It was the Japanese version of Russian Roulette and the man who pulled the trigger for us was the emotionless, sad-eyed Hazama.

The N.C.O.s did what little could be done. We grew as cunning as foxes, for open defiance of these madmen was worse than useless. I cultivated Ichinoi and Hazama, talked to them of their families, and at times had them so engrossed in reminiscence that a precious five or ten minutes was gained before work resumed.

A gambit that worked occasionally when they were at boiling point was to undertake to give the men a pep talk. On this pretext, work would stop and men would gather round to hear a speech that began, “Now this is a bloody lot of bullshit, but for Pete’s sake, try to look impressed. Nippon soldier Ichinoi say

speedo speedo, etc." If one mentioned "speedo" and "Nippon soldier Ichinoi" every minute or so, the speech could ramble on until many were almost thankful to return to work. I was not required to work as consistently as the men, for Ichinoi and Hazama preferred to have me at their beck and call, interpreting their wishes and passing on their commands. Often I longed to lose myself in the obscurity of the workers, but just as often I was grateful to be spared much of the non-stop, man-killing labour.

When the beatings took place there was a need for caution and for cunning. Many and many a beating I watched without interference, for my prestige was slight and had to be reserved for vital moments. Where possible, I tried to hand out a token punishment myself, but this seldom worked. When a beating reached a lethal stage that demanded action, I often pulled the gambit of pushing between them, slapping at my fellow P.O.W. in apparently uncontrollable zeal. Then one could make a fine show of cuffing and shouting "No good, no good, speedo" and then quickly pushing the man back to his work.

I had to be convincing, and on one occasion when Hazama had murder in his eye and had the blood pouring through Alan Porter's fair hair, I burst into the fray like a rocket, shouldered Hazama aside in my "eagerness," rained a shower of cuffs and buffets on Alan that hurt not a bit for all their sound and fury, and booted him back to work almost before Hazama realized what had happened.

I could feel Hazama's gaze boring into my back as I turned, apparently still shaking with rage and grumbling to myself, but although his assassin's eyes were speculative, all that happened was that I received a pat on the back and a Kinchi cigarette. But there were plenty of other N.C.O.s who did far more than I, and protected their men until they were knocked unconscious. These men I could only admire; to emulate them was something else again.

I learnt to know my Japanese friends and how best to wheedle rest periods from them. Hazama could always be sold on logic such as "the men will work better if they have a short rest." He could often be stopped from punishing a man if he could be assured that the man was a top-class worker.

Ichinoi, on the other hand, cared nothing for these things, but

tell him that the men would not be able to "jiggy-jig" unless they rested, and you had a chance. Similarly, if a man trembled and shook in a malarial fever, and you wanted to send him back to camp, it was a waste of breath to appeal to Ichinoi on the ground of humanity. But tell him the man had nine children and was that way because of too much "jiggy-jig," and there was often high-pitched laughter, and permission was granted readily. And next day, Ichinoi would come up shaking with laughter and making obscene gestures and ask, "Jiggy-jig soldier ok-ka?"

But all the time it was like playing with a tiger—a tiger that purred while you tickled his chin, but whose slowly swishing tail betrayed the latent menace. And inevitably, some of the men I had cuffed and buffeted died, and it was an eerie feeling to wake in the night and recall the dead comrades I had struck whose bodies were buried at the back of the camp. And if I sometimes gave a shiver of superstitious dread, I often wondered if the Japanese were ever haunted by their deeds and the men in the ever-growing cemetery.

One day Vic Charlesworth returned to camp nursing a swollen jaw and spitting blood. "That bloody swine Battle-gong," he growled. "What was the bastard in civilian life? A boxer or something?"

Sergeant Norm Hollow, whose slow voice had inevitably led to the nickname of "Sleepy" Hollow, looked up and in his quiet way said, "As a matter of fact, Vic I believe he was a butcher."

"That would be right," Vic said bitterly. "It fits him like a French letter."

Small bullocks were occasionally brought to the camp, and on such occasions the one hundred and twenty pounds or so of meat helped to swell our rations. One of our men, a Queensland butcher, suggested to the Japanese that we "rustle" cattle from the herds being driven past K3 *en route* to camps further north. The Japanese agreed, providing they received the heart, liver, kidneys, and blood of each beast killed.

On this understanding, our guards distracted the Japanese in charge of the cattle, and stampeded them towards our camp. Our butcher and his mates worked with suspicious skill and soon had fourteen beasts in a hidden enclosure.

From then on a bullock was killed each day, and the Japanese

and Koreans gathered with their mugs when the animal's throat was cut. They believed that by drinking the blood they would be imbued with the beast's strength and courage, but as we watched them drink and shout wild songs and thump their blood-spattered chests, we shivered. It was barbaric.

Despite the Japanese pressure on Captain Parker, nearly one third of the men in camp were incapable of work and a new camp, Konyu 2 (later known as Malayan Hamlet), was established at the end of May. Konyu 2 was only a fdw hundred yards from K3, and into this camp of ill omen marched Colonel Oakes and some six hundred Australians—fresh sacrifices for the god of Hellfire Pass.

Teddy Bailey, shivering and shaking with malaria, was on hammer and tap, and in his feverish condition, could not hold the drill steady. His hammer man kept missing the drill and "Battlegong," misinterpreting the situation, rushed up, snatched the hammer, and started to give one of those one-minute, frantic speed demonstrations so dear to the Japanese.

He swung twice and because of the wavering drill missed both times. There was a quickly suppressed laugh behind him, and without hesitation, Battlegong swung the eight-pound hammer and hit Teddy a terrible blow on the head. He was carried back to camp and died soon after.

The cutting now became almost unbearable on still days and the heat bounced back malevolently from the rock face behind us. Our sweat grew tasteless from lack of salt, and dysentery—as voracious as a rat—wrenched at our bowels. Rib cages protruded, and muscles became merely strings that connected our joints. The cemetery grew and grew, and we thought—quite wrongly—that nothing worse could befall us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT WAS MAY 1943 and man, as he had since time began, went on killing his brother. On 22 May the monsoon broke in central Thailand and its coming affected every living creature, above or below the earth. The driving rain lashed at us, with only infrequent pause, for sixteen days. It flooded the Menan Kwa Noi which carried in its surging waters the seed of plague. It also washed away the roads and made a quagmire of K3. Drainage was useless in this flat area and the water lay stagnant in great pools. The driving rain poured through our superbly inadequate tents; sometimes in drips of majestic dimension, other times in a penetrating spray.

Our bare feet now slipped and slithered, and we floundered in the mud and tore our feet on the bamboo spikes that we could no longer see. Mud clung obstinately to shovels and found its way into our rice. We lived like automatons. Breakfast was eaten in the dark, with the rain lashing superfluously into our already watery "pap." We worked until the light gave out, and then, saturated and muddy, returned in the dark to damp sodden bedding and a tent that leaked and dripped. Only now, there was room for all.

Despite it all, exhaustion brought sleep as soon as we lay down, but often after waking in the night I fought to stay awake and lay savouring every second of the luxury of merely lying quietly, without sight or sound of the cutting and its masters of mayhem. I dreaded sleep, for sleep made the hours pass as seconds and swiftly brought the morning and its attendant danger from the mad Ichinoi and the sad-eyed Hazama, squatting like fate on his rock of judgement.

And sometimes I would dream of home and food, or long past triumphs at sport, but when I woke the bitter difference between the dream and reality came like a knife and brought bile to my mouth.

From Colonel Oakes's K2 camp just up the road from us came reports of deaths from cholera, and immediately strict rules of hygiene were enforced. Drinking of any but boiled water was forbidden, mess gear was sterilized in boiling water after each

meal, and all possible precautions were taken against the flies that swarmed around in clouds about us and made life a misery.

Night work was introduced, and huge bamboo fires and carbide lamps flooded the cutting with glaring light. The rain eased to intermittent showers, and the work was increased to fifteen hours a day.

Inevitably, cholera descended on the camp and ran among us like a crazy woman, striking here and there in a fickle, erratic, chartless pattern. The thoroughly unnerved Japanese rushed vaccine to us, but the deaths continued and we carried the light, stiff bodies to huge bamboo pyres and cremated them. To add to the strain of K3 life, we now lived in fear of this plague. Our neighbours at K2 were also hit hard and in one spell of nine days, seventy-two men died from cholera alone.

Cholera, of all plagues, strikes most abruptly and kills most surely and speedily. We were told that the symptoms to watch for were griping pains, vomiting, and the passing of watery, light-coloured motions of the bowels. But, heigho, we all had dysentery and thus griping pains were our constant companions and our bodily wastes were normally watery and light in colour. Few Thailand men will ever forget the intensive, life and death study we made of each bowel movement and the agonizing doubts that gripped us on occasions. The night brought its particular fear, for in the moonlight every motion was white.

Bob Beaumont, calm and competent character that he was, was only one of many who ran desperately to Captain Parker blurting out that they had cholera. We feared cholera, Japanese and Australians alike, and not without good cause. It strikes without rhyme or reason and the convulsions of vomiting and bowels rob even a healthy man of every drop of moisture within twenty-four hours. In the early stages the diarrhoea is comparatively painless but later as the body becomes dehydrated the cramps and convulsions are agonizing.

More anti-tank men died. Noel Gillespie, Terry Ryan, Jack Archer. From down the line came news that Laurie Peasley had died. Big, gangling Laurie—"All hands and feet" to his friends—was a gentle, happy-natured giant, but his large frame had been of no help whatever in this world of small rations. And light-hearted Jimmy Cozens of the ready smile had died of cardiac

beriberi. One grew angry with fate for taking only our best and most lovable.

As the hammer and tap men fell away in numbers and strength, there was an increasing pressure on us to prise out larger and larger rocks without the aid of explosives. I came to bless the skill and endurance of the squad, and in particular, the ability of Dick Herring and Sid Horner, both of whom were small of stature but big of heart and whose skill with the crowbar was uncanny. Time and again their judgement and gift of leverage averted disaster at the hands of the insanely impatient Ichinoi. On our part, too, there was now a terrible anxiety to finish the work, and have done with the cutting. Sabotage and the usual "go slow" tactics were forgotten, for it became clearer every day that survival lay in finishing the task, and getting away from the hottest spot on the Thailand Railway.

Even in the dreary world of K3 there were certain consolations, and I came more and more to admire the sturdy strength of the Australians in the cutting and to appreciate the integrity of spirit that refused to despair when despair was the only logical emotion. They were starved and humiliated and their bodies were broken, but the spirit that kept these bony scarecrows working for fifteen hours a day remained rock firm. Never, never was there despair or the desire to improve their lot by co-operation with the enemy.

This spirit was typified by two Australians who shall be nameless and who were ordered to work in the Japanese kitchen at K3. This work would have brought them light duties and plenty of food far from the heat and toil of the cutting. Despite this, the two boys fought hard to stay with their mates, and when they were eventually forced to take up duty in the Japanese kitchen, they did such nauseating and inexcusable things to the Japanese food that they were soon sent back to the cutting as "no good" workers—an accolade which they accepted with considerable pride. One cannot condone their actions, but the spirit that inspired them was magnificent.

Sunsets viewed from the cutting were often breathtaking—the Master working with His pallet to create perfection that filled the sky with glory. In the early days of K3, Bob Beaumont and his fellow "dreamers" often returned to the cutting in the evening to

lose themselves in the glory of the setting sun. Later, of course, the Japanese kindly arranged things so that it was unnecessary for them to make a special and tiring second trip.

There was also consolation in the thought that, if these terrible things had to happen, at least it was an all male world that was involved. Again and again we gave thanks that there were no women or children whose pain and suffering could wrench our hearts. At least we were spared the additional agony of the men of Dachau and Belsen.

Lastly, it also consoled me that, in this greatest of all wars, I was at least playing an active part. My father had been badly wounded in France in 1918 but despite this I had spent years envying him the fate that brought a war in his time. Now I had my wish, and, come what might, a part of me relished the sheer adventure of it all.

The staggering number of sick and dying left the Japanese no alternative but to remove these wrecks from the working camps and send them to back areas where they could be made fit to labour again for the glory of Dai Nippon. Evacuation of the desperately sick began in July, and like most Japanese projects, it was a haphazard and primitive operation. Emaciated men were packed into barges and often arrived at down-river camps with most of their number dead. The misery of these barge trips, with most of the men suffering from acute dysentery, was indescribable, but to the survivors, the base camps, overcrowded and filthy as they were, came as a vision of Paradise.

A Queensland artillery man at K3 was a quiet, reserved person and the father of five children. The day that evacuation for the desperately ill became definite, he walked to the butcher's block in the camp kitchen and calmly chopped off four fingers.

Another artillery man picked up a rock that he could hardly lift and deliberately let it drop on his bare foot. I recall seeing another man calmly place a large stone under his heel and another at the back of his knee. When all was done he took a deep pull on his cigarette, closed his eyes, and nodded to his mate to drop a heavy rock on his shinbone.

Charles Fotheringham, neat and clean as always, came to my tent and for once his pleasant smile was missing.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant, but you are to report to the Engineers'

camp immediately."

"What's the trouble, Mr Fotheringham?"

"I'm afraid it is trouble, Sergeant. The Jap in charge of the stores has reported a shovel missing after you boys left the cutting. Have a good answer ready. Would it help if I came with you?"

I shook my head. There was no satisfactory answer. I had been let down by someone, who through exhaustion or carelessness, had not handed in his shovel after the day's work.

I reported to the well-fed Ichinoi, and protested my innocence; I had not been trying to defraud the Japanese Empire of a shovel. While we talked, and Ichinoi carefully worked himself into a spontaneous rage, other guards drifted out with an air of pleasant anticipation, and with more than a touch of dismay I realized that I was billed to provide the evening's entertainment.

In a most unselfish endeavour to enable all the Knights of Bushido to have a fair deal, Ichinoi, with the air of one teeing up a golf ball, carefully placed me on a slight mound. Battlegong gave a hawk of sheer pleasure, and then punches rained on me from all angles.

Fortunately, I had little difficulty in remaining upright—a punch on the jaw would send me inclining backwards, a kidney punch would straighten me; a hook from one side would heel me over, a wallop from the other side would restore me to due north. I had seen too many similar punishments develop into blood baths not to be concerned, but before I could get seriously hurt, Hazama said something, and, very reluctantly, the pack backed off. Hazama stood directly in front of me and his black eyes, which seemed to hold all the sadness of the world, met mine for a few seconds. Then he gave me mild slaps that worried me not at all and with a gruff "Kurra" shoo'd me back to camp.

I returned to my tent vastly relieved, and as I rubbed my bruises in the dark I thought smugly how advisable it was to have a friend in high places.

Into the harsh cutting, one crisp August morning, flew clouds of butterflies. Delicate and incongruously beautiful in this setting, they came in their thousands and swarmed over us, sipping our sweat. The guards at first slapped and killed in annoyance, and the P.O.W.s found them a nuisance, for these delicate creatures

tickled and itched as they sipped.

But, after a while, everybody—Japanese, Koreans, and Australians alike—were caught in the spell of the amazing scene, and, long after they had left in soundless floating clouds, a little of their magic stayed with us. When I asked Hazama if they had such butterflies in Japan, his strong white teeth showed in one of his rare smiles, and for the first time we saw his dark face become animated.

I had a day off with malaria and a temperature that occasionally topped the century. As I left my tent to do some grave-digging a voice rasped my name and I looked up to see Dick Herring staggering towards me with a stricken look.

"Sarge, Sarge, help me," he begged. "Get me water, quick."

I got my waterbottle and tin mug from the tent and found that Dick had collapsed in the mud. I lifted him up, cradled his head, and gave him a drink. Dick drank as if he would never stop and then instantly vomited all over me.

"Sorry, Sarge, sorry," he said, and then vomited over me again. Captain Parker arrived on the scene and before Dick was carried to the "hospital," he clutched my hand weakly and said, "Sorry to be such a nuisance, Ken."

"That's all right, Dickie boy," I replied, and patted the grey face with affection. A few hours later I was told that Dick Herring had died of cholera and then, in terror, I buried the waterbottle and mug, burnt my G-string and cord, and scrubbed my body without mercy. But later I was to remember only a gallant and gentle friend who apologized for being a nuisance even as he died.

The sick, the dying, and the dead forced the Japanese to bring up more labour, and specially selected men under Captain Newton arrived to help in the final burst. Incredibly, the work day was set at eighteen hours per day and stayed at that figure until the cutting was completed some seven weeks later. We drew lunch at dawn; the evening meal of rice and stew was brought to the cutting at seven and was eaten on the job. An air compressor and twelve jackhammers were installed in the cutting, and at least the weary hammer and tap men had some slight relief.

Among the newcomers were a number of officers from the H6 Officers' Working Party. This group had been formed in Changi, where they were given to understand that they would be

employed on camp administration and labour supervision only. Consequently many physically

歷史的五日間の記錄

八月六日（月曜日）
英米科學者の苦心研究になる戰史上最初の原子爆彈が海軍要港にして且つ陸軍基地たる廣島市に投下される。唯一箇丈のこの原子爆彈に依り廣島市の三分の二が忽ち見る影もなく破壞される。未だ地球上に現はれたことのない大慘禍である。

八月八日（水曜日）
モスコー政府は八月九日以後ソヴイエット聯邦の對日戰參加を正式發表。

八月九日（木曜日）
赤軍の滿州進攻開始後僅か數時間にして、怖る可き原子爆彈の第二彈が長崎市に投下されたる旨公表される。今は長崎がこの怖る可き煙滅を蒙つたわけである。

八月十日（金曜日）
東京JOAKは左の如き放送を行ふ。
「世界的平和を回復し以て戰爭に依る悲慘なる苦惱の終結を考求せらるゝ聖旨を奉じ、日本帝國政府は左の通り決議せり。
日本帝國政府は七月二十六日亞米利加合衆國、大英帝國並に中華民國により決議せられ且つその後ソヴイエット聯邦政府に依り承認せられたるポツツダム共同宣言書の諸條項が最高統治者たる　天皇の主權に抵觸せざる限り、該宣言書の諸章項を受容するの用意を有するものなり。」

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Leaflet dropped after the war on isolated pockets of Japanese troops who refused to believe that the war was over.

Japanese Army Commander with white surrender plane in background.

Aircraft carrier, H.M.S. Speaker, *Manila.*

unfit and older men had been included, and the party had suffered badly in Thailand. By the time the survivors had reached Hellfire Pass they had adopted a determined “go slow” policy as their one hope of survival. At no time did they ever refuse to

work, but their efforts could have been duplicated by a four year old boy.

I remember well the English officer from the Indian Army who was put to work in our rock-rolling area. He obtained a small basket and, sitting beside it, he put in one small stone at a time. As he sat, Ichinoi belted him with a bamboo pole and while the blows landed, the officer protected his head, then as soon as Ichinoi paused for breath, he resumed picking up his small stones one by one. When the basket was full he picked it up and in slow motion began to carry it to the edge of the cutting. Ichinoi swung a ferocious blow at him with a pick-handle and knocked him and his stones down the slope. The officer picked himself up, gingerly felt what we later found out was a broken rib, and then sat down again and began putting the spilled stones back into the basket one by one.

Ichinoi laughed harshly and a little uneasily and seeing me watching, tapped his head significantly, and pointed to the officer "byoki!" (sick). But we both knew who had won that particular contest.

These officers were flogged and battered, and very often carried back to camp unconscious, but never did they deviate from their Gandhi-like policy; less than a week later they were classified as "no good" workers and banished to a quieter part of the line.

One hot afternoon in early June, Gordon Phair calmly laid down his shovel, walked to the jungle's edge, and set off steadily into the wilderness towards Burma. Something in his trance-like air alerted Bob Beaumont who raced after him and found him plodding into nowhere in a coma of heat and exhaustion. Later, Gordon had no recollection of his action.

A savage drama, completely in keeping with the times, was enacted a few tents away from us. One of the hammer and tap men had been driven almost frantic by continual persecution from a Korean guard. Finally, goaded beyond endurance, he waited along the jungle track that led to the cutting, leapt on the Korean, and smashed in his head with an iron bar. Panic-stricken, he pulled the body into the jungle among the orchids, and went to his tent mates for advice. There was a tense, whispered conference in the flickering light of a pig-fat lamp with a cord for

a wick, and it was decided to hide the body in the one place never searched by the Japanese. While men kept watch, the body was carried to the latrines at the back of the camp and weighted with rocks from the cutting. (This was considered a masterpiece of poetic justice). Then, with long bamboo poles, the body was pushed far down into the deep trench.

Those concerned slept fitfully that night, and waited tensely for the Japanese reaction next day. Amazingly, nothing ever happened and never in any way was the subject raised by the Japanese. They may have thought that he was taken by a wild animal. Which, in a way, he had been.

We were close to having a similar incident in our circle as a group of us came across Vic Charlesworth lurking by the track with an iron bar and the firm intention of inflicting great violence on Battlegong. Vic, although a smallish man, was very sturdy under normal conditions and a man to be respected when aroused. Now, however, he would have been lucky to tip the scales at seven stone, and although we had absolutely no objection to Battlegong landing in the mire as it were, we considered Vic's ambition greater than his strength and dragged him back to camp.

At the end of a long day I hauled myself up out of the cutting, and, as I started along the track back to camp, George Smith waited and said, "Can you make it, Sarge? Let me carry your waterbottle and dixie."

I looked at him in surprise. For one thing, I was not feeling any more exhausted than usual, while George himself looked worn out and desperately thin. But more than that, his offer of help came as a shock, and it struck me all of a sudden that our fight for survival was taking every ounce of each man's concentration and effort, and left little thought for outsiders. We lived in watertight compartments, concentrating only on ourselves and our close friends.

I liked George, although he had never been a specially close friend, but now, as we walked together, I felt a tremendous surge of affection for this gaunt, ragged boy, and I resolved to keep a special eye on him in the cutting.

Thus time crept slowly on.

An orderly carrying a bucket of tea slipped and knocked down

the bamboo fence that the Japanese had erected around their camp as protection from the wild elephants.

The strain told on us all. One of the Englishmen—a quiet, decent fellow really—brought me his dixie of rice in complaint and asked, "Look, Sergeant, be this ration?" Something beyond my control—strain, nerves, irritation—made me say "Yes, you bastard," and knock it into his face.

Incredibly, in this wild outpost, we were issued with letter cards, and allowed to write home. The choice was of the "My health is excellent" or "I am ill in hospital" variety, and it was touching to see even men close to death sending the message, "My health is excellent" rather than bring anxiety and worry to their loved ones.

A battalion of Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders came marching past K3 *en route* for a camp further north, and the sweep and the skirl of the pipes that led them was a stirring thing. Behind them—a complete rabble—trudged a battalion of Dutch P.O.W.s.

Working elephants arrived and were quartered between the Japanese camp and us. The small stream that provided our only water was now used first by the Japanese and then by the elephants as both a bathing place and a toilet.

The cholera attacks eased off; bamboo fires no longer burnt far into the night, flinging black smoke into the still air.

An English officer walking past our camp dropped as if pole-axed and was dead before Doc Parker could reach him.

In the cutting the frantically impatient Japanese often exploded the charges before the P.O.W. could reach cover, and many were showered and hit by flying rocks.

Battlegong, irritable and brutal, hit Eric Stone on the nose with an eight-pound hammer. The same day he deliberately rolled down a rock on to an Englishman's legs. The English boy escaped with four stitches but Eric Stone died at Konyu River camp one month and three days later.

Major Schneider, smart as paint during training days and dashing in action, sat crying in his tent of a morning as the travesties of men were hounded and driven to the line.

"Parky"—Private Parkison of the Malay Volunteers, fashioned a

crude rag doll, called it Battlegong, and pushed slivers of bamboo into it. “This voodoo works in Africa,” said Parky, “and if intensity of thought has anything to do with it, it’s going to work here too.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ONE EVENING IN early August, I was sitting on the tent floor resting after a day in the cutting. Suddenly there came appalling pain and I found myself rolling around the floor, clutching my abdomen and groaning lustily. It was acute appendicitis, and Doc Parker made preparations to operate immediately. I was more than fortunate in that our small camp possessed a first-class surgeon and that he still had a small supply of anaesthetics. Others, later, were not so lucky. Fortunately too, I was blissfully unaware that another man had been operated on for appendicitis at K3 and that he had died when the appendix burst.

A few hours later I lay on a stretcher sweating and I heard Doc Parker talking in the adjoining tent with another doctor whom he had called down from Colonel Oakes's camp.

"But Dick," said the K2 medico, "why not wait until morning when you'll have better light?"

Parker hesitated and said doubtfully, "No, I think I'll do it tonight. I have chaps building fires and setting up a tent at the moment."

"Well, it's your decision, Dick" his colleague replied. "Personally I'd do it in the morning."

There was a silence, and then Doc Parker answered more firmly, "No, everything is just about ready. I might as well go right ahead."

The operation took place at 1 a.m. and must have been a dramatic sight in the jungle wilderness. A large tent of mosquito netting had been erected around a bamboo table in the middle of the parade ground, and bamboo fires blazed on both sides of the tent. Inside the tent, the illumination was supplied by an orderly with a lantern in one hand and a torch in the other. The operation went smoothly until the offending organ lay exposed ready for castration and then all concerned had to down tools to deal with a large flying beetle that took too close an interest in the proceedings.

I swam up from the depths to see Dick Parker's face smiling down. "How do you feel, young fellow?" he asked.

“Fine, sir,” I answered. “Did everything go well?”

Dick Parker, not realizing that I had overheard the conversation in the tent, flexed his arm muscle in mock boasting and said smilingly, “Yes, very well, Sergeant, but you’re rather lucky that we operated last night. It was ready to burst, and you would never have lasted until the morning!”

The drama of the operation appealed to the Japanese, and for a few days I was a minor celebrity; and from the Japanese cookhouse came an unprecedented gift of some three pounds of white sugar, an unheard of luxury at K3.

Naturally enough, after the first few days I was forgotten by all except the hard-working Doc Parker, and I had time to study the hospital tent in which I now lived. With a shock I realized that I was the only one recuperating—the rest were dying. The patients, mainly dysentery cases, varied in number from twelve to eighteen as they came and died. They arrived desperately ill by normal standards, and the hot tent, the poor food, the lack of medicine, the stench, and the eternal flies by day and bugs and lice by night were anything but helpful to men fighting for their lives.

As I gained strength, it became painfully obvious that Captain Parker and the few orderlies he could keep in camp were cruelly overworked in the cholera compound and that I was badly needed here in this so-called hospital. For here were men so emaciated that it did not seem possible they could look like that, and still live. Men lay in squalor and their own filth as they died.

There was a tall English boy who was taking weeks to die and I saw with horror a blowfly crawl from his rectum and another from his open mouth as he lay in a coma. Ah yes, there was work aplenty here for an active man.

I boiled water for these men, and wiped them clean. I washed clothes and bedding, and brushed the flies from them; after rain I dried their meagre possessions. I learnt that dysentery was a cruel, bitter death, and I came to recognize the stages that led to the last merciful coma when they lay in a twilight world, waiting only for their unknowing heart to cease its vain struggle. They lay on their soiled strip of blanket, not yet dead, nor yet alive; careless now of blows or pain, ambition or fear; it was beyond the power of man to do them further ill.

And I learnt that often a drop in temperature following a

sudden shower was enough to tip the delicate balance and send them from this world—gently, almost imperceptibly.

Each day I doled out the precious sugar, and with its aid men lived longer than they might have done. But no matter what I did or how I tried, each man died. I cajoled and wheedled, “Keep trying, keep eating; struggle now and your reward is forty years of life, of children, of peace.” Like a boring, persistent salesman, I compared their struggle to sport. I reminded them of how often you are tempted to give up in a long game, but after the match is won, you are horrified at how close you were to despair, But, inevitably one by one they stopped eating and ceased to live.

Into this tent of death came George Smith, and because I had a tremendous affection for George since his offer of help on the jungle track, I determined fiercely that he was one who would not die. I talked as earnestly as I could concluding, “George, you must do two things. At all costs you must keep eating and you must get out of bed for each meal. Believe me, George, once they start staying in bed and missing meals, there’s only one end.”

George got up each mealtime, sat on the log outside the tent with me, and forced down some sugared rice. Between times, like the others, he passed thirty and more bowel movements a day and I stripped tree after tree of their larger leaves.

But I forgot that I was not God and there came the morning when George spoke weakly from his bed of bamboo slats, “I don’t think I’ll get up this morning, Sarge. I don’t feel like anything to eat.” I wheeled around with a sick feeling in my stomach and said hotly, “Now look here, George, you know what we….” and then our eyes met and we both knew.

George Smith died a week later and during that time I kept him clean and free from flies and as comfortable as possible. Just before he died in the early evening, he grasped my left wrist quite painfully and, with sweat standing out on his forehead, whispered something I did not quite catch, but could have been “remember.” I bent closer and said “Remember what, George?” But I need not have worried. I gently disengaged his fingers, for George had gone to join the men of Gettysburg and Passchendaele.

Big, Irish, red-headed Paddy was also in the hospital and Paddy I did not like at all. There was a cajoling air about him that

grated on me and even when he said such things as, “It’s wonderful it is to have ye here, Sergeant. It’s a grand job that ye are doing,” I found it insincere. But Paddy too, stopped eating and the flesh fell away alarmingly from his big frame.

In a desperate effort, I wangled a few tidbits of cooked meat from the cookhouse but still Paddy would not eat and, in a frenzy of frustration and helplessness, I grabbed his thick red hair and banged his head up and down on the bamboo, shouting, “Eat, you bastard, eat, eat, *eat!”*

But Paddy was sick unto death and could only lie there with his eyes closed and his chest heaving, like a lion betrayed by age and brought down and harried by the jackals.

Paddy, too, died soon after and for the only time in my P.O.W. life there were tears in the night and, strangely they were not for friends or companions, but for red-headed Paddy, whom I had not liked at all.

Remorselessly the anti-tank men continued to die. Jack Mahoney, Frank Wade, Tom Hart, Cliff McCrae, Fred Webb. Each man a friend, each friend a ghost. Some of the old Puduites died, including Reg Dudley whose forecast of Easter 1944 as the date of our release had seemed utterly fantastic coming from such an intelligent man, and had caused hoots of derision and even a touch of anger. Or as close to anger as one could be with such a fine man as Reg Dudley.

Each death was a hard and bitter one with little enough dignity, but often, in death or sleep, the sharp lines of the face softened and one realized with a perceptible shock, that these grey, haggard, stubble-bearded men were only boys of twenty-three or twenty-four.

Captain Parker could assess their remaining span of life but to save them was beyond his power, and there was neither priest or padre to bless these remaining days of their short lives.

The thought came one night, that if I could not stop them dying, I could at least help them to die, and I went as far as to whittle a length of bamboo into a finely pointed spear. Many things hindered me—the effect on other patients, the improbability of deceiving Captain Parker, and … Thou shalt not kill. But, in the final analysis, I lacked the courage to perform this last duty for them.

The cutting was now very deep indeed and in places the rock face was over forty feet high. Bob Beaumont was ordered by Hazama to climb some thirty feet up the rock face carrying an iron drill and a rope. Bob took one look at the almost sheer rock face with its thousands of sharp points, and another at his bare feet, and told Hazama he could not do it. Hazama's dark face suddenly went bleak and he looked about for a weapon, whereupon our Robert hastily reconsidered his decision and commenced to climb.

Half-way up the rock face the inevitable happened—Bob came under the influence of Sir Isaac Newton and started to fall backwards. He saved himself by frantic scrabbling but lost his grip on the iron bar which came tumbling down and clanged to the ground close to Hazama!

With deadly menace in every movement, Hazama picked up the iron bar and set off after Bob who promptly flew up the sheer rock face like a mountain goat and then, without hesitation, ran for his life to the camp. Hazama, finding the rock wall too sheer even for his split-toe rubber shoes, went the long way round to the jungle track and set off purposefully after his prey.

Bob reached the camp exhausted and in tears and who could blame him, for beyond doubt it was Death that ran so implacably behind him. Bob ran, as we all did in a crisis, to Captain Parker. He blurted out his story and said, "He'll kill me. He's completely crazy. You've got to hide me."

Dick Parker, calm and capable as always, thought quickly and said, "There's only one place for you my boy. Into the cholera compound, quickly now."

Bob was hastily pushed into the bamboo-fenced cholera compound and when Hazama, armed with his iron bar, burst into the camp like a wild beast, no one had seen or heard of Robert Beaumont. And although Hazama searched tents, the hospital, the cookhouse, and even the latrines, he avoided the cholera compound like the plague, so to speak.

VX36455 Gunner Smith, E. C, variously known as Bill, Ed, Edgar, Smithy, and Smythe, was in many ways typical of a class of soldier spawned by the A.I.F. during the war. A class of men who were neither heroes nor cowards, but ordinary decent men caught up in a nasty situation that dismayed them, trying always

to do their best. Dark-haired Ed, an accountant by profession, was of medium height, not particularly athletic by nature or build, and possessed a bobbing gait that made him roundly abused by every man who had attempted to march in step behind him. But Ed also had a most active mind that kept him interested and stimulated wherever he found himself, and his bobbing gait had carried him into the heart of Thailand when the bigger and stronger, and the shorter and sturdier, had fallen by the wayside.

But even Ed's deceptive strength was being sapped to an alarming degree in the cutting until the Japanese gave us a "glass rod" test for cholera. Next day Ed found himself in the cholera compound, for the Japanese—rather cleverly—always put three men's test specimens under the one number, and, if one of the three showed positive, no one but God knew which of the three carried the seed of plague. Which was how Ed Smith and two other men found themselves in the cholera compound, studying each other with fascination.

Towards the finish, incredible though it seems, men were being carried to the cutting on stretchers so that work parties might reach their normal strength.

Our officers, Major Quick, Captain Stabb, Peter Whitti-combe, Charles Fotheringham, and the others did what they could. They were a good bunch and, to the best of their ability, fought to gain concessions for the men. But orders for this particular "Speedo" had come direct from Tokyo itself and against that fact their best endeavours crumbled.

Captain Richard Parker was by far the most outstanding figure at K3. Capable and seemingly tireless, he was the rock on which we all leant, and time and again he outwitted the Japanese on our behalf. He fought to keep sick men in the camp, he kept men in the cholera compound for weeks after the unlucky member of their trio had died, and men were evacuated from K3 with Parker using every ounce of his intelligence to rig the papers and swell the numbers. K3 brought nothing but horror and death to most, but to Dick Parker it brought his finest hour.

A Japanese guard armed with rifle and bayonet came to the hospital tent one morning and motioned me to follow him. We picked up two Englishmen from our tent lines, and then another three Australians from K2 camp. After drawing shovels we were

marched some four miles up the lines to a native camp, and put to work digging a large shallow trench. We kept steadily at this all morning and by one o'clock we had a sizeable pit, roughly ten feet wide by ten feet deep.

Our little guard motioned us to "yasume" and left. He returned fifteen minutes later with three more guards and a dixie of steaming rice. It seemed that we had stumbled on that K3 rarity —a good work party with a few "perks" thrown in.

After lunch we were taken to the native camp, which was occupied almost entirely by Tamils, and the true nature of our job suddenly became clear. We were a burial party.

The Tamils had been recruited from Malaya where they, and thousands like them, had been beguiled by Japanese promises of high pay and good food into signing six-month contracts to work on the railway. Cholera and dysentery had hit this camp, and the Tamils—who believe in reincarnation and thus possess a somewhat fatalistic outlook on life—had been dying like flies. Their lack of even the most elementary principles of hygiene, allied to their callous and uncaring attitude to their fellows, made their camp a charnel house.

Our task was to go through the small camp, tent by tent, and drag out the dead. The stench and foulness of the first tent was beyond belief, and we walked through caked excreta and swarms of flies to reach the two bodies. Eventually we worked out a system of dragging the bodies out of the tent with the loops and then manoeuvring them on to stretchers made of two long bamboo poles and a blanket. Thus we were able to tip the bodies into the grave without having to touch them.

Nevertheless, it was nauseating work, and when the K3 guard, as sickened as myself despite his gauze mask, suggested that he and I search the surrounding area for bodies, I hastily agreed. We wandered about for an hour, smoked his cigarettes, and located four bodies, one only a matter of twenty or thirty feet from where we had eaten our lunch.

When the others joined us, they looked ghastly, and had some grim stories to tell: of having to prod bodies to see if they were alive; of Tamils pointing to a fellow Tamil and saying, "Cholera"; of prodding the protesting wretches out of tents with a bamboo pole so that the guards could shoot them; of seeing naked fear

and apprehension in the eyes of the sick as the burial party entered the tent. We filled in the grave into which had been tipped about thirty bodies and were glad to cover these pathetic remains and the attendant swarm of flies. Harry Brown, a Malay volunteer, looked back as we walked away and said softly, “Poor bastards,” and that was their burial service in the hills of Hintok.

I was weary of death and dying men, and when next day Captain Parker asked apologetically, “Could you face the cutting, Sergeant?” I said almost eagerly, “Ready for action, sir.”

As I packed up to leave the hospital, I picked up the jar containing the pound or so of sugar that was left and put it in my haversack. “After all,” I argued, “it was never clear if the sugar was for me or for the hospital. In any case, it was only given to us because of my operation.” Then I looked at the sick and dying men lying on the bamboo slats and I put it back again. Two minutes later, cursing my weakness and knowing that I was little better than a murderer, I put it back in my haversack. There was none to stop me; none to query me. All who had been there when the sugar first arrived were now dead, and all I had to do in any case was to say that we had used it all. Only I would know. Finally, after a horrible few minutes, I left the sugar in the hospital but it had been a near thing, and 1 was shocked, then and since, to think of the weakness of this human clay.

Eddie Smith, after being rested in the cholera compound for weeks after death had alighted on another member of his trio, was evacuated to Konyu River camp.

I emerged from the hospital, Bob Beaumont crept gingerly from the cholera compound, and together Bob and I joined Dick Rosser, Charlie Baker, and a handful of others in the last days of Hellfire Pass.

Things had changed mightily in the five weeks or so since I had left, and the air-driven jackhammers and the eighteen-hour day had speeded progress considerably. There were new faces everywhere, but still reigning supreme like a slant-eyed unholy Trinity were Messrs Ichinoi, Hazama, and Battlegong.

Ichinoi merely grunted when he saw me, but Hazama of the dark impassive face came up and gave me a clap on the shoulders that hurt more than many a blow he had given me in anger. There was undoubtedly a *simpatico* between Hazama and me, and

although I found his actions unforgivable I could not dislike the man himself. (I hasten to add that this was purely a personal opinion. Every other P.O.W. regarded him as little better than a mad dog.)

Another guard, a small nondescript fellow, whom I could hardly remember, came over with a smile and asked where I had been. When I told him, he became quite excited, and it appeared that he, too, had just had his appendix removed, and had only been back on the job for a few days. With professional interest he asked to see my scar, and when I showed him the neatest, smallest cut imaginable, his eyes grew round and he pulled down the top of his trousers to show a large, livid, zigzag scar that suggested his operation had been performed by a butcher with an axe. Our little guard grimaced and drawing his hand across his throat, said in disgust, "Nippon doctor!" and I felt prouder than ever of Doc Parker.

Battlegong was now in charge of a team of twenty hammer and tap men, and his megalomania grew greater and greater. As his team grew sick and died, Battlegong instituted a ritual of giving the replacement a most terrible and bloody first day. Before my operation I had seen him stand Ed Smith to attention on the edge of a rock with a twelve foot drop in the cutting and then do his best to knock him off the rock. This interesting little ploy now became a favourite and men allotted to his squad went ashen when they heard the news. But after the bloody baptism of the first day, one was admitted to Battlegong's flock and cherished while he contented himself with beating up new members and outsiders.

Alan Day had a most incredible first day under Battlegong who was at his best, or worst, whichever way you view it. Alan was bashed and battered, made to hold rocks above his head, given no rest periods whatever, and was finally knocked off a rock and fell some five or six feet. He landed very awkwardly and afterwards complained of severe pains in the back. Finally he said to his mates, "I just can't swing a hammer with this back. I've got nothing to lose—I'll ask him if I can go back to camp and see Doc Parker."

He made his request to Battlegong who heard him in silence until he stopped and then gave him a hefty wallop in the solar

plexus that sent Alan's breath out with an audible "whoof." Later in the day one of the boys asked Alan how he felt. Alan thought it over and then said bitterly, "I hate to say a good word for that little bastard, but I've got to admit it—my backache's completely gone."

But now the end was on us and the final stick of gelignite was thrust into the womb of the last rock and exploded. Thus, with a bang and not with a whimper, the cutting ended. The final rock was rolled down the mountain and for the last time we heard the answering screams of fury and defiance from below.

Bob Beaumont, much fitter since his "yasume" in the cholera compound and vastly relieved that Hazama had never recognized him since his emergence, looked thoughtful as we marched away. "It's incredible" he said slowly. "Nobody but these crazy Nips would have even contemplated such a scheme, but do you realize that we've created something here that could remain for hundreds of years?"

It was true. With the most primitive of tools and a few sticks of gelignite, we had altered the face of nature and carved a memorial in solid rock. And the cost? Between the two camps, K2 and K3, over three hundred and fifty men had died to build the 580 yard long cutting.

Captain Newton, who was in charge of all P.O.W.s in this area, and who had access to medical records and reports, estimated that sixty-eight men were beaten to death in the cutting. These figures, tragic enough as they were, do not include the many who died in other camps as a consequence of the brutalities experienced at Hellfire Pass. Nor does it include the men who died in the barges *en route* to base camps.

It was little wonder that we sighed with relief as we left Hellfire Pass and moved on to help complete the huge wooden bridge at Hintok, called the "pack of cards" bridge because it fell down so often. It was to provide us with hazardous work under its delightful master of ceremonies—the aptly named "Mad Mongrel."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OUR NEXT SCENE of activity, the "pack of cards" bridge at Hintok, was beyond doubt an amazing feat—not so much of engineering as of carpentry. The ironically named bridge had fallen down three times during its construction, and it was owing to its third collapse that we had been called in.

The bridge, built entirely of wood, looked utterly fantastic. Needless to say, the wood had been selected purely on the basis of availability, and ranged from teak to kapok. Small matters such as the curing of the timber were ignored, and consequently all the timber used was green, and several varieties had very different properties when dry.

Since such refinements as nuts and bolts, steel plates, etc., were lacking, the bridge was held together with wooden wedges, bamboo ties, atap lashing, wooden dowels, a few iron spikes, and lots of faith. It was almost a quarter of a mile long, and was eighty feet high. During its erection, thirty-one men had been killed in falls from it (many pushed and kicked off by the guards), and twenty-nine had been beaten to death.

We continued to sleep at K3, and although our work on the bridge lasted barely three weeks, there was seldom a dull moment. Our chief tormentor here, and for many months to come, was a brutal, flat-faced horror known to all as "the Mad Mongrel." He was a powerful and vicious example of the worst type of Korean guard, and he revelled in every minute of his authority. He was particularly detested, not only for his murderous savagery, but also for his habit of seeking out the P.O.W.s for his entertainment at night. Others, such as Ichinoi and Battlegong, were terrors by day, but at the finish of the day's work they lost interest in us until the next day. But the Mongrel delighted in arming himself with a rifle and fixed bayonet and prowling round inflicting torture and sometimes death at the slightest pretext.

I was fortunate in spending only a few days on the actual bridge and on the second day found myself precariously perched some forty feet above Mother Earth, trying to drive a steel spike in place with my right hand while the Mongrel stood on the

fingers of my left hand screaming, “Bugerro! speedo, *speedo!”*

Fortunately his split-toe rubber shoes cushioned the pain, but I was able to understand clearly why thirty-one men had fallen to their death and an amalgam of fright and pain made me shout, “Bugger off, you crazy bastard.” At which the Mongrel ground his foot down a little harder and then walked away grinning broadly.

But two nights later the Mongrel beat a man to death for little more than a whim and I shivered when I heard the news.

“We had a spell of pile driving, Nippon style, and this was just about as primitive as the Neanderthal man. A heavy weight (usually a log with an iron cap) was placed above the foundation log and from the weight a rope ran up over a pulley, and at our end had ten or more small ropes attached to the main rope.

The principle was simple—when we pulled our ropes the weight was lifted into the air; when we released the ropes the weight dropped down its cradle and thudded on to the foundation log, driving it ever deeper into the earth. So all the hot day long we toiled—pick up the rope, strain five or six paces back, let go, pick up the rope—as close to being galley slaves as one could wish.

Fortunately for us the elephants brought up to pull the logs from the jungle were unable to keep their footing in this steep muddy terrain, and we were released from the ropes to take their place. It needed ten of us to do the work of one elephant, and we pulled and tugged out the logs, while the elephants, in true Nippon spirit, were punished by being put on half rations. We grew to love these scrawny beasts. We could almost see the expression of puzzlement in their beady eyes as they watched us doing the work they could not manage.

To our surprise we completed our work, the sleepers were laid, and still the bridge stood four square. We held our breath fearing high winds and a further collapse, but the incredible structure remained as upright as a judge and now it was time to leave K3 and move on to fresh woods and pastures new.

There was time for one last visit to the cemetery. Time to stand once more over the muddy graves with their bamboo crosses and to reflect on the tentacles of sorrow that would spread from this desolate plot to leave their legacy of pain in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Australia.

We left K3 and its deserted and forlorn cemetery, its stripped trees, and the charred bones in the ashes of the bamboo pyres, but perhaps all of us had died a little here and there was not one that did not leave a little of himself with those who stayed behind. We left them to their Creator and to the jungle that was already tracing green fingers over the early graves.

Our Kismet decreed that we were to stay in Thailand for almost another year, and, although the work was often very hard and the Japanese and Koreans very violent, nothing was ever quite as bad as K3 and Hellfire Pass.

In general, our duties now consisted of maintenance work on the railway, and because of this we moved up and down the line, staying for periods in camps at Hintok, Konyu, Chungkai, Tampie, Tarsau, Tamakan, Kanburi, Kinsayoh, and Tamuan. There was a certain sameness about all these camps but undoubtedly there were moments of more than passing interest.…

We came to the mountain camp of Hintok and in many ways this was the saddest camp of them all. Beautifully sited in the wild jungle-covered mountains, Hintok had been a clean and model camp. Many things there had been unique. A bamboo palisade surrounded the camp and the deep latrines had fly proof covers and a timbered roof. In the early days of the camp, the Australians had performed miracles in building a small reservoir of crystal clear water in the mountains above and had run it in bamboo pipes to the camp where it supplied the showers and cookhouse with clear mountain water. Hintok had also possessed a bugler who blew Reveille and the Last Post from a silver bugle and had made the echoes ring stirringly around the mountain tops.

But when we arrived at Hintok, cholera and the Japanese had taken their toll and the camp was semi-deserted; the few survivors were grey and slow moving. The camp had the ghostly air of a ruined city.

But it was History writ small, for the clear water still ran and the bamboo showers still stood—symbols of Man's eternal struggle to rise above his environment.

The Japanese at Hintok Road camp received very poor rations, and were just as hungry as we were. Our work at this stage was close to a loop siding and, not for the first time, the Japanese and

the prisoners banded together to defraud the Imperial Japanese Empire.

The plan was a simple one and worked to perfection on several occasions. Our local Japanese, who knew when the ration train was due, would signal the train into the siding and then distract the crew while we dragged out bags of rice, dried fish, and vegetables. Twice the train crews discovered what was happening, and set off after the thieves. When this happened, our slant-eyed partners in crime, who controlled all the up and down traffic through Hintok, would quickly call off the chase by blowing the whistle to indicate that the train must leave immediately.

Not far from Hintok camp the boys stumbled upon acres and acres of wild tobacco plants in flower. The tobacco was enthusiastically harvested and dried, and not only kept men in smokes for months, but was also traded for hundreds of duck eggs that undoubtedly saved lives.

We had another windfall at this camp too. It all began with a baboon. Every day we watched intrigued as it danced and screamed at us from a dead tree. The Japanese, who had an almost superstitious fear of wild animals, took the unusual step of giving rifles and ammunition to a party of P.O.W.s and telling them to track down and shoot the baboon. The boys wandered off without any supervision whatever from the Japanesese, and shot a small deer and some birds, but carefully refrained from potting the baboon which continued its daily jig and caper.

At Hintok River camp there were, for once, guards who were so reasonable that we were allowed to take a short cut through the Japanese tent lines to the river. One afternoon Bob Beaumont, Vic Charlesworth, Dave Wheeler, and Wally Johnston were walking past the Japanese tents on their way to the river. The place seemed to be deserted, so out of curiosity, they cautiously peered into some of the open tents. One tent had dozens of pin-ups on the wall, some cut from magazines, and some actual photographs. Wally Johnston, who had been idly admiring the display, suddenly noticed a photo of a dark-haired lass with a baby on her knee. He stiffened and let out an incredulous shout, “There’s my wife. Look, there she is on the wall!”

“Break it down, Wally,” said Dave Wheeler.

“Come on out of the hot sun,” Bob Beaumont suggested kindly, while Vic Charlesworth observed to the world in general, “Poor bastard’s gone troppo.”

“I tell you it’s my wife, Jean.” Wally was vehement, and while the others kept watch he rushed in and grabbed the photo which he had never seen before. It turned out that mail had arrived at Hintok for the prisoners, and, although the Japanese would not release it, their Bushido code had not prevented them from ransacking the letters for pin-ups.

Which was how Wally Johnston, in the mountains of Hintok, saw for the first time his first-born child.

One day a train pulled into the Hintok siding. Several of the boys noticed four or five guards sleeping in the rear truck with the sliding door closed, and for some reason the word went round that one of the sleeping guards was Battlegong. A close lookout was kept, while two men carefully and silently unhooked the coupling of the rear van and allowed it to roll back down the slope. The heavy van quickly gathered speed, and finally, failing to take the bend at the bottom of the long slope, crashed into a gully nearly three-quarters of a mile from the siding. Several Japanese and Koreans were killed, but alas, Battlegong had not been in the van. The Japanese at Hintok, with their usual indifference to human life, were quite unconcerned, and made no form of inquiry. Presumably they took it for granted that the coupling had been faulty.

We found that ordinary table knives and bayonets made quite passable “cut-throat” razors if you took enough care in grinding them, and by this means we stayed reasonably clean shaven. There was an occasional issue of safety razor blades from the Japanese but, as might be expected from a race who seldom grow hair on the face and who virtually never shave, the blades were painfully blunt and almost useless to men without soap and with only cold water as a beard softener.

Often in the various camps we saw Japanese soldiers toiling past on their way to the Burma front line. Their equipment and arms were invariably piled on to heavy carts, and these were pulled by oxen which were flogged and prodded along until they died. Then the Japanese themselves would man the shafts. They could be heard from miles off, as they strained up the rough

tracks through the mountains, yelling and squealing to encourage themselves. And often, as they reached the crest and began the easier downhill run, we could hear their strangely haunting marching song.

Once we asked an interpreter what it was the Japanese sang, and he replied proudly, "It is Umi-yukaba! Japanese warrior sing this song for a thousand years!" Later he wrote down for us the translation:

If the war is on the sea we will die
And be part of the sea.
If the war is on land we will die
And be part of the land.
Our one endeavour is to die
Beside the Emperor's flag
There is no time to look back
Or to think of ourselves.

As we watched them strain and toil to pull their heavy guns and carts through this wild country, and heard their haunting yet menacing song. I felt that here was the soul of Japan. Certainly I could only admire the spirit and courage of this strange and contradictory race.

One night Bob Beaumont, completely exhausted, climbed into the bottom bunk of a two-tiered hut at Tarsao and fell asleep instantly. He was awakened by a voice saying urgently, "Eh, mate, wake up and give us a hand here, would you?" Bob reluctantly opened sleepy eyes and saw two bare feet oscillating gently alongside his head. While he was sleeping, an Englishman in the bunk above him, weary of the world and its problems, had quietly hanged himself from the rafters.

Many Japanese officers spoke good English, and it was often wise to be wary of the others who apparently spoke only Japanese. This was proved by a story we heard about a conference between the Japanese and British officers on the question of rations. At the end of the meeting the senior British officer bowed to the Japanese Commandant as he rose to leave, and the Commandant, who had been in charge of the camp for eight months and had never spoken one word of English, turned to his interpreter and remarked, "Rather Elizabethan, don't you think?"

I was commandeered for another burial party at a native camp and here too, the Indians had relinquished life with neither grace nor spirit. They believe in reincarnation, of course, and with the expectation of many more lives to come, one could understand their not being over-excited at this particular phase of their existence. There were the same nauseating and sordid scenes in this charnel house of a camp and we heard the thud of the rifle butts bringing a merciful quietus. And there was one man who ran frantically from the mass grave until he was shot like a running deer. I remember the corpse we found with a Malayan dollar in its mouth and, startled, I thought of the ancient Romans who buried their dead with a coin in the mouth to pay the god Charon for ferrying the body across the river Styx to the underworld.

Scrawled in red crayon on the inside of one tent was the message, “All I have is for family look my family. Ghant.”

The constant fear in the base camps was of being sent north again to the work camps. It was not just a dislike of hard work, but a very real fear of death, for every so often barge-loads of evacuated men would come down from the upper camps, and we had the sickening task of separating the living from the dead.

The Japanese demand for working parties was constant, and the day came when we paraded before a selection committee headed by the Japanese medical officer, “Doctor Death” and Sergeant Hiramatso, better known as “The Tiger.” There was a standard test. If you could half run across the forty yard wide parade ground, then you were fit for months of work up north—and kicks and blows from the Japanese quickly uncovered the actors and malingerers. Our medical officers had about thirty serious dysentery cases grouped apart and firmly stated that it was impossible for these men to work. Hiramatso, although a hard and efficient soldier, was like most Japanese in that he only believed anything on the evidence of his eyes. To break the deadlock in the argument over the dysentery cases, he gave one of the most unusual orders ever given to British soldiers, “All men benjo!”

The thirty men obeyed as one with ridiculous ease, and Hiramatso, pulling a face of disgust, said firmly, “Okay, byoki (sick),” and the dysentery cases were left in peace.

So we went north again, and now a new problem confronted us —ulcers. Our condition was such that the slightest scratch from bamboo turned septic, and without treatment quickly spread to a gaping hole. The ulcer wards were places of pain and horror; the smell and the blowflies were abominable.

At Kinsayoh I developed a nasty ulcer on the left shin and paraded before the well-known Colonel "Weary" Dunlop. Weary puffed at his pipe and said, "Keep it clean and keep off it as much as you can." I looked at him and felt like shouting, "How can I stay off it when I work ten hours a day? Mark me unfit for work, you stupid bastard, or I'll lose my leg!" But one look at Weary's sad face, and the sight of many with worse ulcers than mine, stopped me.

So the ulcer grew and grew, and I was eventually evacuated to Chungkai, where I lay on my back for two months and watched the shin bone gradually exposing itself.

Each day the saw was taken from the cookhouse, sterilized, and used for amputations. Then it was sterilized again and returned to the cooks for cutting up the day's meat ration. From my tent I could hear the rasp of the saw, and this ultimate horror was the only thing that made bearable the daily visit of the orderly who gouged with a spoon until the raw healthy flesh was exposed. Sometimes when this became unthinkable, we went to the river and allowed the fish to nibble away at the bad flesh. But my ulcer continued to spread; and then one day my condition was considered serious enough for me to be given a small quantity of priceless iodoform, and the leg healed like magic.

Kanburi camp was a dismal, bug-ridden place. I and a few others got into the habit of dodging the bugs by sleeping on the floor of the "Mortuary," a hut put aside for the reception of those who died in the night. The living slept on the floor; the dead had the last privilege of a stretcher. Several times I woke to find myself flanked by the dead and it brought to mind an ancient Swedish custom. On Christmas Eve families slept on straw laid on the floor, so that the homesick spirits of the dead could, for one night, sleep in their old and loved beds.

It was a "yasume" day and I slung a tattered old towel around my neck and set off for a swim. There were five or six off-duty

guards lounging on the veranda as I passed the guardhouse and I saluted smartly. The guard on duty acknowledged the salute with a quiet “cos” (good), but a second later there was a roar of rage from one of the off-duty guards and a squat, peasantish type rushed out and with one swing laid me in the dust. Fortunately Namoto, the interpreter, was also in the guardhouse, and hearing the gibbers of rage, came rushing to the scene. He asked a few questions and then said, “In village where this soldier live, they have top man. Some other guy wants to be top man he puts a towel around his neck and walks down main street slowly.”

Namoto, who had lived in Hawaii for many years, looked at me with a deadpan expression on his face, and drawled in his American voice, “You reckon you’re number one guy around here?” I hastily removed the offending towel from my neck and assured all concerned of my utter humility (at 7 stone 3 lb. I had little trouble in being convincing), and the affair ended with smiles all round and a cigarette presento from my touchy friend.

Namoto also interpreted all speeches made by the Camp Commandant, who loved to dress up in full regalia and inflict lengthy orations on his charges—a captive audience in every sense of the term. Namoto had a laconic humour, and on one occasion the Commandant read from a script and rattled on for at least three minutes before allowing his beautiful prose to be translated. Namoto, whose American accent came so oddly from his slant-eyed, brutal face, was more than equal to the occasion, and merely said, “The number one bossman reckons you guys got to work a lot harder and get your finger out of your ass now and again.”

Few interpreters possessed the fluency of Namoto, and there were always certain problems where language was concerned. Once a Japanese officer was told that there was a “short” in a vehicle’s electrical system. “Make all shorts longer!” he ordered.

Darky Morshead and Bob Beaumont became engrossed in talking about Melbourne, and, with their thoughts literally 6,000 miles away, committed the mortal sin of passing the guardhouse without saluting. Screams of rage brought them back to Tarsao with a bump and the guards, ever on the alert for a little boyish fun, made the boys toe a line and place their hands high above them on the wall of the guardhouse. Then the men of Bushido

produced lighted cigarettes and, in a spirit of scientific investigation, began to prod them into the nape of the boys' necks. Darky wailed with anguish as his back hairs sizzled and he said—quite reflectively, "You know, Bob, you've just got to hand it to these bastards for ingenuity." This, in its time and place, struck Bob as being very funny indeed, so much so that he gave an involuntary laugh and in so doing jerked back his head and stubbed out the guard's cigarette.

This earned him an indignant "Kurra" and some irritable slaps. His predicament struck Darky as also being very funny, and he too, laughed—and was also slapped. Which of course, struck Bob as being quite funny—and so on until they were both laughing like idiots. And finally the guards began to laugh too, and putting their fingers to their head and twirling them to indicate a crazy man, shooed them back to camp.

The ego of the guards grew to absurd dimensions. Several adopted the practice of making their squad sing on request, and woe betide any reluctant Caruso. One guard insisted that the men under him sing their National Anthem, but when the Australians sang "God save the King" he grew very cross indeed, for he *knew* that "God save the King" was the British anthem. So, rather than risk bringing thunderclouds of displeasure to that sloping forehead, the boys sang lustily, "She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes," and the guard beamed and smiled, particularly at the second verse, which we always sang, "They'll be dropping thousand-pounders when they come, when they come."

There are many kinds of war effort for one's country.

At Kinsayoh there was great excitement among the guards when a new team of Thai prostitutes arrived to fill the Japanese brothel. The Thai girls were small and brown, chattered like birds, and were decidedly attractive—so much so that quite a few P.O.W.s made cautious advances and were somewhat chagrined when they were repulsed.

However, on the second night, one of the girls who could speak English whispered, "We are all with disease. For Japanese, good. For British soldier, no. You understand?"

An incident that caused great hilarity in quite a few camps occurred when a squad of men led by an Australian Sergeant

arrived at a new camp late at night. Their guards quickly melted away to the Japanese cookhouse, and the men were left tired and hungry on the parade ground. Shouts and calls failed to stir anyone in the dark and the party began to howl and bark like dogs. This caused a light to appear in one of the huts and eventually a group of Dutch officers with lanterns appeared. The Australian Sergeant, weary and exasperated, called out, “Hey, any of you blokes speak English?” The leader of the officers, a kindly faced, rather elderly man, spoke up and said, “Ja. I do, just a leedle.”

“Good,” said the Sergeant with satisfaction, “you can get ———— for a start.”

The Japanese never at any stage provided iodoform or similar drugs in Thailand, and our doctors had to rely on what could be bought from the Siamese from time to time. Consequently there was always a certain element of luck in whether the ulcer cases lost their legs or not.

One of our men had suffered agony with his huge ulcer and begged the doctors to remove his leg. We visited him after the operation and, to our delight, found him in high spirits.

“You old bastard,” he said, looking at where his leg had been, “you’ll never trouble me again.” Then he grinned and added, “And while you nongers are out flogging yourselves to death on the railway, I’ll be here having a big fat yasume.” But on a second visit I found him crying in his bunk and, embarrassed, I tip-toed away and asked friends what had upset him.

“Didn’t you hear?” asked Keith Fletcher in surprise, “Tom has developed an ulcer on his other leg.”

The year 1944 passed into lusty manhood.

We had learnt to face the rising sun and bow each morning, though what we said under our breath was unprintable. Traders flourished in the easier atmosphere of the base camps, and one prisoner was able to order and pay for a barge-load of eleven thousand eggs. Again the rains came, and once more we slipped and slithered and slept with mud up to our knees. The doctors grew more and more concerned at the condition of their worn-out and rusted instruments. At one cholera injection the orderly tried three needles before one penetrated my arm, and even then it

was so bell-mouthed that it hurt more coming out than going in. We all suffered from beriberi, and indentations made in our legs remained for hours. There were twenty-five burials in one day at Chungkai—the aftermath of the great Speedo. The extreme lack of vitamins now began to affect our eyes, and there were tragic cases of men becoming blind with agonizing slowness and certainty. Attempts were made to make yeast, and all men were under strict orders to hand in "Marmite" for the men who were going blind.

On 24 May 1944, we were evacuated to Tamuan and for the first time occupied a clean, well laid out camp where the work was particularly light. And here, with magnificent timing, I went down with typhus.

The Medical Dictionary describes typhus as "an infectious fever … filth and over crowding favour its occurrence … intense headaches, a feeling of illness, chills, pains all over the body, and great weakness … the prostration increases … delirium develops and the patient passes into a state of coma … convalescence is prolonged and may last several months."

It *was* rather nasty, and, as at Pudu, I fancied myself on a boat moored in midstream under a blazing sun with the monkeys chattering and playing on the deck about me. But, again as at Pudu, there came the day when the monkeys became men and the chattering turned into human speech and I learnt that the Japanese had ordered all fit men to stand by for a working party to Japan.

Too much had happened even to think of being separated from Jim Ellis, Ed Smith, Bob Beaumont, and the others, and I was determined not to be left behind. Also it seemed that this greatest of all wars must come to a climax in Japan and I fancied that the Land of the Cherry Blossom might be a stirring place from which to see out the finish. There was little trouble in getting on the draft as the Japanese idea of what constituted a "fit" man was not hard to meet and I was helped by the fact that many were trying frantically to get off the Japan party.

We were to embark from Singapore and on 22 June we clambered into the inevitable rice trucks and set our face to the Lion City. My temperature that day was 103 degrees.

We left the wild, beautiful, treacherous land of Siam with few

regrets. Many of our friends, were to stay and work on the railway until the end of the war and they were to know hard days. We left Bill Morrison, “Nigger” Miley, Gordon McGrath, and hundreds of other one-legged men behind, but we also said “sayonara” to Ichinoi, Hazama, Battlegong, the Mad Mongrel, the Storm Trooper, and many other stout characters.

We travelled for the last time over this futile railway—of no value to the Japanese during the war, and promptly abandoned by the Thais after the war.

Yet, in the final accounting three hundred and four men were to die for every *mile* of track laid.… One human life with all its hopes, fears, and dreams, for every seventeen feet six inches of track.

The cruise of the *Byoki Maru*

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE JOURNEY DOWN to Singapore took five days and four nights, and was every bit as ghastly as our excursion into Thailand, but I sat with my head between my knees for much of the way, and in my stupor much of the unpleasantness escaped me.

However, I remember the meal halt at Taiping and how the natives crowded round and begged for food and tobacco. One gaunt Indian said desperately that his wife and children were starving, and when I gave him three meals of rice his face disintegrated and I felt embarrassed and somehow rather mean, for in any case I couldn't eat.

Taiping was dead and half deserted and was typical of the Malaya now in its third year as a member of "The South East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." The shops were closed, and the rubber plantations were not being worked; along the railway line the Japanese had cleared the land for two chains on either side and had given it to the natives for the growing of vegetables.

We crossed the causeway into Singapore just after midnight, and all along the train, like a battle cry came a roar of "You'll never get off the island," and truckloads of men whooped and hollered and burst into such laughter that the guards grew uneasy.

Our metal centipede ground to a halt at the Singapore railway station and we were whisked away through the deserted streets and empty shops, not to Changi, but to our old camp at River Valley where the bugs and lice greeted us like old friends.

Here we rested and licked our wounds for five quiet days, and marvelled at the luxury of water that actually ran from taps. We marvelled, too, at the strange quiet of Singapore; there was practically no sign of life anywhere. The Chinese to whom we spoke through the wire said that thousands had been taken to Thailand, and the young men now stayed off the streets lest the

Japanese, like the press gangs of old, should swoop down on them and force them into service.

The shops were mostly closed and the few that were open had little to sell and badly needed painting. And over the great city—almost a tangible thing—hung this strange silence. But we slept each night under stars clustered unbelievably thick and beautiful and the palms still swayed, and the frangipani and the flame trees still rioted into colour, to remind us that Nature takes little heed of the foolishness of Man.

On 1 July 1944 we marched through the streets of Singapore for the last time and embarked for Japan. Our ship was a former British freighter that had been captured by the Japanese. She was named the *Potamac Maru.* We took one startled and incredulous look and promptly christened her the *Byoki Maru* (the sick ship), and so perfect was the name that even the Japanese crew adopted it with glee.

The *Byoki Maru* was a very sick ship indeed. She had been bombed in Java, and the entire centre section, including the bridge, had been burnt out. Two long steel building girders ran from stem to stern, one on each side of the ship, and these, welded in slapdash fashion to the deck, served the vital purpose of holding the two halves of the ship together. An emergency steering wheel had been set up in a bamboo structure that stood where the bridge had been, and the sum effect was that of a country toilet. On either side of this stood two other bamboo structures that were, respectively, the Japanese cookhouse and the prisoners' cookhouse.

As the steering house stood on deck level and was fairly low, the steersman relied for instructions mainly on a sailor who stood in the prow of the ship and shouted directions to a second sailor stationed near the first hold, who in turn shouted the message to the man at the wheel. But, like the battered prisoners of war she carried, the *Byoki* had a sound heart, and she possessed a set of Vickers engines said to be capable of nineteen knots.

We were packed and crammed into the holds, and at first it was sitting room only, but then men began to wander all over the ship and to find beds on the cargo of tin ingots and rubber bales. The Japanese discipline was surprisingly mild, and quite a few men, including the sick, were allowed to sleep on deck. Toilet

facilities were provided from wooden boxes with widely spaced slats that were roped to the outside of the ship.

The cruise started off quietly enough, and we took up a rear position in a convoy of thirteen ships, escorted by three warships. During the first few days we were seldom out of sight of land and the convoy dawdled up the coast of Borneo, hugging each bay and inlet like an ardent lover, and came at last to Brunei, where we anchored for several days while our convoy grew to nineteen strong, plus escorts.

The Captain was a rollicking Nippon salt of the old school, and the evening we left Brunei he staggered on board much the worse for *sake,* and promptly embarked on a wild dash that took the *Byoki* from last in the convoy to first. He stood in the steering house, his face flushed, roaring out sea shanties at the top of his voice while the *Byoki's* still magnificent engines drove her through the dark night and the blacked-out zigzagging convoy.

He sang all the louder in his steering house of singing bamboo when the lookouts (and our guards) frantically screamed warnings about dark shapes looming up out of the night, and while the men in the "thunder boxes" leapt for their lives. It was a fantastic few hours with the Captain lustily singing, the lookouts' voices cracking in high falsettos of alarm, and the white-faced, bare-bottomed men leaping from the thunder boxes as darkened ships appeared in our path. But we made it, and the only repercussion was that from then on the *Byoki* led the convoy.

We crawled slowly and lovingly along the coast of Palawan Island, and came at last to the Philippines. And there, off the island of Mindoro, we came upon a most beautiful and incredibly perfect scene. A fleet of sampans were out fishing in the night, and long before we came to them we could see their lights flickering and twinkling like stars on the sea. And then as we passed, they turned black one by one as they were silhouetted against the huge full moon that hung on the horizon.

One morning the rugged cliffs of the legendary Corregidor rose out of the sea—and on 17 July, almost two and a half weeks after boarding the *Byoki,* we anchored in Manila Bay and stayed there for twenty-two hot days. The convoy grew and grew until almost a hundred ships were in the harbour. Several attempts were made

to leave, but each time reports of American submarines caused us to turn back.

On the evening of 9 August we left Manila, and the Japanese announced that this time we were going through regardless. We sailed out of Manila Bay behind a Japanese fleet, but as we moved into the deep waters of the South China Sea and its dangers the fleet turned south while the *Byoki* led the convoy to the north. The honeymoon was over, the Japanese bashed those who tried to come up on deck, and all night long we felt the vibration of speed.

Next morning the convoy was in a single line that stretched to the horizon. From the temporary lookout of a thunder box we could see that the *Byoki* was leading a line of about thirty ships. Behind us, so close that we could see the planes and the Japanese nurses on board, was a well-laden, large new tanker.

Just before midday, without the slightest warning, there was a tremendous explosion that shook the *Byoki* from stem to stern, and the tanker immediately behind us went up in a roaring sheet of flame and sank in less than five minutes. Almost simultaneously, much further back in the line the only other tanker in the convoy was torpedoed, and sank. It was a magnificent exercise in co-ordination, but it gave us a nasty feeling to realize that we had been squarely in the sights of a submarine and had been allowed to pass only because of the more handsome prize behind us. But we lay quietly, fearing the rending crash that might come at any moment, leaving us trapped in the rusty bowels of the *Byoki.* The Japanese warships came racing up, and our guards, some of whom had taken to the life-boats in panic, hastily climbed back on board. Some forty or fifty depth charges were dropped, but the only effect was to shake incredible quantities of rust from the *Byoki* and to make us wince each time the hammer blows of concussion jolted our tired old tramp.

At last the depth charges stopped, and we realized with relief that the Japanese attack on the sub had failed.

Two days later the weather grew increasingly threatening and by mid morning we were in the middle of a typhoon. The convoy was quickly scattered, and soon the bucking, plunging *Byoki* was alone in a wasteland of grey sea under a leaden sky that seemed

almost to touch the tip of the wildly gyrating mast.

Our seriously sick men were stretched out in the “sick bay,” a small area of deck space surrounded by drums of latex, and soon the wild motion of the ship caused several of the drums to break loose and smash. The thick, sticky stuff poured along the deck over those unfortunates, pinning them to the deck like insects to flypaper, while the heavy seas often broke over them to mingle with the latex and the vomit.

We were sitting in the forward hold some ten feet below the deck, but so steep were our plunges that we had a good view of the wild scene. It was a frightening sight, and yet tremendously thrilling. The wind that howled and shrieked through the rigging drove wave after huge wave ponderously forward, flinging spume and spray into the air in a heavy screen. It was the Master painting his canvas with violent but majestic strokes.

All was well until the raging wind turned the ship sideways and then, as we lay in the trough, a monstrous wave fell on us with appalling force. The *Byoki* shuddered, and there was a sickening crack from the deck, while the stress in the hold caused rivets to burst from the plates like machine-gun bullets. It was obvious that the welded girders holding the ship together were tearing away under the strain.

The Captain, grimly sober now, and some of the crew came to our hold, and as they looked and prodded another huge wave caught the ship side-on in the trough, and fell upon her so that there was a further rending of metal and popping of rivets. The Captain looked at us, grimaced, held up two fingers, made a motion to indicate a wave hitting us, and turned down his thumb. This was clear enough.… Two more such waves and sayonara *Byoki Maru* and sayonara all men. It was August the thirteenth.

We turned painfully into the wind, and then, miraculously, the *Byoki* came to a small islet, hardly more than a large rock in this wilderness of water, and twelve hundred men breathed freely again as we anchored in its shelter.

We left the rock with the sea in a heavy but regular swell, and we sailed alone, for the typhoon had scattered the convoy to the four winds. In the early morning there was a heavy bump on the side of the hold, and a trickle of sea water came from a small hole apparently caused by a submerged log. Since the submarine

attack the hosing down on the deck that we had been permitted had been abandoned, and our one pint of water a day left nothing for washing or shaving. We were scruffy, sticky, hot, and smelly, and at the sight of the sea water, Pross Reid and big Don Moore looked at each other with an unholy light in their eyes. It was short work to enlarge the hole until the cool water gushed in. A queue of eager men soon formed, and for the rest of the morning we splashed and frolicked to our heart's content before reporting the damage to the Japanese.

The ship's carpenter descended with the Captain and after a great deal of head scratching and "ah so-kas," the carpenter hacked a rough point at the end of a large teak pole, wrapped cloth around it, and drove it into the hole with a ten-pound hammer. The *Byoki* sailed serenely on, but until we arrived in cooler climates the wooden plug was loosened every so often and we splashed and frolicked happily while the ocean gushed into the rusty hold.

The Japanese were never slow in utilizing the free labour of the P.O.W.s, and, even as we had left the wharf to board the *Byoki,* each man had been made to carry on board two twenty-pound bundles of solid latex. Now—on the voyage itself—we were required to supply a party each day to shovel coal into the bunkers. This was a nightmare task in which men shovelled and sweated in an airless, dust-laden, dimly lit bunker, while the ship rolled and tossed fiendishly. Even the hardiest were sick here on occasions and staggered out black-faced and wretched.

Hans, one of our Dutch friends, was shovelling on the day that one of the bunkers caught on fire. It was brought under control before much damage was caused but as Hans put it, "Two more minutes we don't see it and—kaput. You understand what I mean? Feenish, isn't it? Ja!"

As I climbed slowly out of the hold my tin mug slipped and fell with a clunk on the head of a man sleeping beneath the ladder. A bony figure clad only in tattered shorts reared up and shouted angrily, "What the bloody hell do you think you're doing, you stupid bloody young idiot!"

So fierce was his tone that despite my guilt, fire struck fire, and I started to say, "Oh, go and ..." but then I saw who it was and said sheepishly, "Sorry, Father." And "Pop" Kennedy, the Catholic

priest, said in a somewhat mollified tone, “That’s all right, my son, but watch what you’re flaming well doing on that ladder.”

Pop Kennedy was shortish, sparse of hair, and the good Lord in His wisdom had blessed him with a large and inflamed whisky drinker’s nose. He was of the earth, earthy, and he ate with us, marched where we marched, lived by our side, and spoke our own forceful language. But there was a strength and a spirit in this rough man with his practical faith, and he spoke not so much of the Kingdom to come, or of texts and dogmas, but of the need for kindness, courage, and cleanliness in our present life. Because he was one of us, seeking no privileges and clearly understanding our problems, his words carried conviction and a strange inspiration.

And when an anti-tank bombardier said, “I’m grateful that you have restored my faith in God, Father, but I can’t come to your Sunday service because I’m an Anglican,” Pop wheeled on him fiercely and said, “Now you listen to me, you young idiot. God is not the property of any one creed. He made us *all,* Anglicans and Catholics, so you be there, or else.”

Inevitably, there was an outbreak of dysentery in one of the holds, and for once in his life Boxhead, one of our obtuse guards, had a genuine inspiration.

“Flies cause dysentery. All men kill flies. No mishi until each man kills fifty flies,” he declared one morning.

This was dismissed as just another example of the meaningless threats we were always hearing, but when midday came and went without food being produced, the hungry prisoners set out in earnest to catch flies.

All that afternoon hundreds of men tracked, stalked, and swatted anything with wings. The *Byoki* teemed with men crawling into every nook and cranny brandishing an astonishing variety of swatting instruments. Arguments grew heated as men swatted flies that other men were stalking; or when a man swatted a fly that had alighted on another man’s blanket.

Admittedly there were a lot of flies in the *Byoki Maru,* but there were certainly not sixty thousand, and by the end of the afternoon many were still short of their quota, despite efforts to ring in mosquitoes and sundry other insects. Box-head, a poor man’s Captain Bligh, made himself comfortable by a hatch,

removed his heavy wooden clog, and ordered his wards to file past him exhibiting their "bag" as they passed. Few came even close to the target of fifty and Boxhead was quick to note flies cut in half and small dark pieces of wood with wings stuck to them. He was also quick to show his displeasure, and half stunned eighty men before his enthusiasm and hitting arm gave out and he grunted wearily, "Okay, all men mishi mishi!" We went to our meal thankful to have been well back in the queue, and grateful to Boxhead that, for the first time in years, we were free of the intolerable flies.

The picturesque island of Formosa—or Taiwan as the Japanese called it—hove into sight and we were soon lost in admiration of the neat farms and terraced hillsides. Apparently our good ship also found Formosa enchanting, and, in the manner of a fond lover throwing himself on the bosom of his beloved, the Byoki advanced enthusiastically on Formosa until a grinding and a scraping told us that we had run aground. Here we stayed firmly stuck, and for the first time since the submarine attack we felt safe.

Eventually three straining tugs hauled us off, and with his ship safely berthed the Captain went ashore. Resplendent in a crumpled uniform with tarnished gold braid, he came down the newly erected gangplank at the precise moment that mess orderly, Bill Belford advanced to the ship's side to empty a bucket of rice slops. Bill, oblivious of both the Captain and the new gangplank, hurled the mess over the side, enveloping the gallant officer in a sticky, nauseating mess of slops. Bill, an ex-Spitfire pilot, stood calmly waiting for punishment to fall. With shrieks of rage and righteous wrath, the two sailors escorting the Captain fell upon Bill and proceeded to uphold the honour of the silent service. The Captain, however, one of those rare birds—a Japanese with a sense of the ridiculous—called them off immediately, and there the matter ended.

He donned a fresh uniform, and got ashore safely on his second venture. When he returned, flushed of face and staggering slightly, it was with an almost incredible luxury—a bottle of red and tasty tomato sauce per man! With this treasure to flavour the rice my appetite returned for the first time since Thailand.

Food became the preoccupation of every man, and groups sat

for hours discussing outstanding meals of the past and planning gigantic menus of the future. Gargantuan feasts of the past were recalled; witnesses were passionately invoked to confirm the crispness of the bread, or to testify to the size and the tenderness of the steak, and in this manner we indulged in countless hours of bitter-sweet torture. Big Jack McIntosh had a copy of Mrs. Beeton's cook book on board and at one stage had a waiting list of fifty-nine young men, each eagerly awaiting their mouth-watering, masochistic hour.

It was September by the time a new convoy was formed, and we left Formosa, our course set for Japan.

We grew thinner and scruffier, and I thought with wry amusement of that last great parade at Tamuan when the Japan party had been selected, and of the rumour that had spread like wildfire that we were being taken to Nippon for "stud" purposes. Well, I suppose they could have done worse if they wanted to produce a virtually indestructible breed.

The *Byoki* ploughed on unmolested, but the submarines were never very far away and often at night we would see fire on the horizon. The battered, tramp-like appearance of the ship protected us, and no submarine skipper was ever able to say, "Ah, sunk the goddam *Byoki Maru* today," but submarine warfare, whether waged by friend or foe, is a cruel and monstrous God-cursed thing, and the memory of doomed nurses running frantically backwards and forwards along the bridge of the blazing tanker will haunt us all our days.

The weather became cooler and our tropics-conditioned bodies began to shiver. Then at last we saw green, mountainous land emerge from the sea and the Japanese sailors began to cheer and shout "Banzai" and we knew that here were the legendary islands of Nippon. We sailed along the coast of Kyushu, and then on 8 September we came to our journey's end and the *Byoki* pulled into the Moji wharf with a splintering crash. Our Captain was true unto the end.

We emerged like troglodytes after exactly seventy days on board the *Byoki Maru,* and as we walked down the gangplank two Japanese medical orderlies sprayed us copiously with DDT powder.

Pross Reid, pulling a ferocious face of distaste, grunted, “Well, you’ll never get off *this* island,” but big dark Bob Ansett only laughed and then sang light heartedly, “One fine day I’ll see him, like a cloud of smoke upon the horizon.” I smiled back. Bob’s rendition was atrocious and I had a suspicion that the words were not quite as Puccini would have preferred, but despite this, Bob was right—it *was* a fine day and we were in the land of Madame Butterfly.

We were still alive and there was adventure in the air.

Japan

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ON THE WHARF we were broken up into groups of about two hundred, and it was here, too, that we were separated from the remaining Australian officers.

Our party trudged to the Moji railway station, where the civilians stared at us with a mixture of curiosity and fear. We were still burnt a deep brown from three years of tropical sun, and were long-haired, grimy, and generally unkempt. So anybody seeing us and hearing the whoops of laughter with which we expressed our joy at being once more on dry land, could not be blamed for regarding us as savages.

To our utter incredulity we were ushered into a spotless, well-upholstered passenger train, and, with all blinds drawn so that we might not observe bomb damage, we sped through the night. Eleven hours later we tumbled out on to the platform of the Nagasaki railway station. As we waited on the platform we looked around us entranced.

Nagasaki bustled and teemed with life and colour that were exhilarating after the months at sea. Opposite the station were rows of colourful shops, and behind them flimsy, dolllike houses stretched away to the hills. Electric trams ran busily up and down the street alongside the station, and the air was full of strange, exciting smells, and the sound of Japanese voices. For the first time we saw the older, kinder faces of the civilians, and were struck by the deep respect in which they obviously held their Army. With much cheering, waving of flags, and singing of the Victory song, a troop train pulled out of the station—the smooth round faces of the Japanese a complete contrast to those of the thin ragged men who watched them with a strange pity.…

Nagasaki was all life and colour and excitement that morning of 1944.

With the departure of the troop train we were allowed to leave.

We trudged to the docks, and embarked on a picturesque ferry that pop-popped its sunny way across Nagasaki Bay. It headed for one of the numerous small islands that dotted the blue waters, and soon we saw our new camp hugging the water's edge. Beyond that again, loomed large and forbidding dockyards.

The camp had been erected on reclaimed ground. It was a wooden, cement-faced building surrounded by barbed wire, and known as Fukuoka 2. We were kept waiting on the parade ground as the new wing—which was being specially prepared for us—was still being wired by the electricians. When they eventually emerged we had a revealing glimpse of the problems facing a country fighting for its life, for the electricians were mere boys, and the foreman—the eldest of them—was no more than thirteen years old.

There were many fine features to our new camp. We were quartered twenty-four to a room, and found to our delight that the double-tiered bunks were clean and covered with firm, fresh-smelling tatami matting. A wooden table and forms ran between two rows of bunks, and each man was issued with two china eating bowls. There were communal hot baths every three days, and the food, which included wheat flour buns, was the best we had yet received, although we could have eaten twice the amount. And, to confirm our belief that we were back to civilization, each man was given thick, warm blankets.

We were each given a number, which was stitched to our cheap, army-style tunics and our small, peaked caps similar to those worn by the Japanese soldiers. Instructions were received that, from here on, all future orders, drill movements, numbering, etc., would be strictly in the Japanese language.

Fukuoka 2 had been established for more than eighteen months, and the old hands were a mixture of English, Dutch, Indonesians, and Americans. We Australians stood out clearly from the rest of the camp for some months until our deep suntan faded.

All the *Byoki Maru* men had their hair cut off completely, in the Japanese manner, and we were then photographed holding a plate showing our P.O.W. number. It was real Alcatraz stuff. I had not looked in a mirror since leaving Thailand and my photo startled me. Suddenly it became clear why friends, with a

mournful shake of the head, had mentally consigned me to the happy hunting grounds. Two burning black eyes stared from a face of bone and parchment, and the cheekbones stood out ridiculously. It was a face from Auschwitz or Dachau, but, strangely enough, I felt fine.

The Sergeant-Major in charge of the camp was a powerful man, built like a wrestler and blessed with the face of an amiable gorilla. He was older than the average Japanese soldier and had been a Tokyo detective before the war. As he punished most misdemeanours by sentencing the culprit to extra hours of work digging in the "boko-go" (air raid shelter) he had come to be known as Boko. He had the detective's knack of scenting trouble, and his ability to appear silently and suddenly at the most inopportune moments, won our grudging admiration. Judged by Thailand standards, Boko was a just and humane soldier with a definite sense of humour and fair play, though the old hands, in their innocence, regarded him as a monster of cruelty and oppression.

Fukuoka 2 had many fine points, but it also had many exasperating regulations. We were not allowed to whistle or sing; nor was smiling encouraged, for such cheerfulness indicated that we thought *we* were winning the war, and such "proud" ideas must be suppressed. Similarly, we were not to fold our arms, for this was an arrogant attitude; nor were we permitted to hold our hands behind our back, for this was how one "stood at ease" in the British Army, and such decadent habits must be abolished. Even on yasume days we were never permitted to lie on our beds during the daylight hours. The ridiculous caps with their tiny peak were never to be worn inside our rooms, but had to be on our bristly heads the second we passed through the door.

Tags of various colours were issued, and the appropriate tag had to be hung on the end of our bunks, showing our whereabouts at all times. The rice diet and the cold had us up on an average of three times a night, and—sleep befuddled—it was easy to forget to hang the "benjo" tag in place before trekking off to the latrines.

Then one would return and sleep would suddenly vanish at the sight of a grinning guard waiting by the empty bunk, and there would be lumps and bumps to be rubbed as you cursed soulfully,

but silently, into the night.

We assembled before the Camp Commandant to be informed through his interpreter that we would be employed in the dockyards, where it would be our privilege to build ships and assist in the final victory. The Commandant remained a shadowy figure whom we scarcely saw, but we came to know the interpreter well. A thin, cadaverous creature with a grey, expressionless face, he was instantly christened "Rigor Mortis." He spoke excellent colloquial English although with a pronounced Yankee accent. It was a far cry from the day in Thailand when a Japanese officer had begun an address from a rostrum, "I am the Nippon Commander of this camp." In a scene which could have come straight from the Goon Show, he had then paused for his interpreter who said, "Diss am da camp boss."

There was a further speech at Naval Headquarters where Rigor Mortis introduced the "Utmost Commander" of the dockyards, a shabbily dressed little man who exhorted us to work hard with a willing heart and to obey all orders cheerfully. He added in a kindly voice that special dockyard police would be provided to ensure that we remained cheerful and willing. Rigor Mortis, with as near to a leer as his expressionless face would allow, added a postscript, "And no foolin' around with the little gals at the dockyard, huh?"

Rigor Mortis walked along our ranks and, apparently quite indiscriminately, pushed us into groups, saying, "Welder, riveter, driller, plate-layer, caulker." I became an electric driller and found it the most interesting work of all, although the most dangerous.

After a short training course we were accepted as fully fledged shipbuilders. The riveters were given a pair of cheap white cotton gloves to mark their new status, and thus we began our dockyard duties.

We were supervised by three sets of controllers. There were the civilian "hanchos" (foremen) who were directly responsible for the work we performed; the dockyard police, or "Gestapo," who prowled the docks to punish the "no good" workers; and finally the Kaigoons, the Japanese marines who controlled the dockyards. The latter were magnificent men. Hand picked and

smartly dressed, they would never demean themselves by entering the noisy, dirty, partly assembled ships, but they were judge, jury, and executioner of the P.O.W.s.

Despite this rigid control and the fact that war was at an admittedly serious stage, we found to our complete surprise that at least fifty per cent of the Japanese workers with whom we shared our duties had one ambition—to do as little as possible. They were weary of a war that they had never wanted, and the dirt, noise, poor food, and squalid dwellings of the dockyards gave little incentive for enthusiasm.

The Americans, who constituted the bulk of the thousand "old hands," did an incredibly small amount of work, and the little they did was so poor that it invariably had to be done again. It was accepted by both parties that the prisoners would stop work the instant they were left without supervision. More incredible still, many of the Japanese civilians adopted the same principle, and we often wondered how any ship was ever completed.

The pattern of our life for the next six months quickly established itself. We rose at five, flung open the windows with a shudder, and for ten minutes rubbed ourselves with a towel. Guards prowled up and down the corridors and outside the windows to ensure that this Nippon health exercise was carried out diligently. Then followed a hasty breakfast, an assembly on the bleak parade ground facing the sea for roll call, and then a march to the docks, where the camp guards handed us over to the Kaigoons. At the docks we worked a twelve-hour day with a half-hour break for lunch. Each twelfth day was a "yasume" day.

We never completely understood the Japanese mind. When the Japan party had been selected in Thailand, men scarcely able to walk had been accepted as fit, whereas strong fit men with red hair, or freckles, had been rejected as "unhealthy."

Now, the giant American planes were beginning to bomb Japan, and we waited uneasily for the reaction. On the first six or seven occasions that the bombers flew over—before it was realized that Nagasaki possessed a magical immunity from attack—we were herded into the air-raid shelters where, side by side with the Japanese, we listened tensely to the drone of engines overhead.

Never was there a trace of resentment from these strange

people and usually the raids were welcomed as a respite from the constant work and dockyard routine. On one occasion we could hear the bombs exploding on a distant town and feel the vibration of the earth, and the Japanese welder sitting next to me —heedless and uncaring of the death and destruction so close— smiled and said, “Shigoto, shigoto, joto nei. Yasume tucsan joto.” (Work all the time no good. Rest very good.) Similarly, as we marched to work and the silver crucifixes flew overhead, our guards would look up and say with admiration and respect, “B ni-ju-ku’s, number one.” (B29 planes are the best.)

The two hanchos I worked under were elderly men, known as “Ginty” and “Pop.” Ginty was thin and wizened; Pop, although short, was plumpish with a round face. Both were grey haired and shabbily dressed. They were quite easy to work for, and became angry only when some idiot took advantage of their good nature and brought the Gestapo snapping about their heels.

I was surprised to see a silver cross on a chain around Pop’s neck one day, and I found out that both he and Ginty were Catholics. I remembered then that Nagasaki had been a centre of the missionary work of St Francis Xavier.

With the clatter of hundreds of rivet guns reverberating and echoing off the steel walls of the ships, and the platelayers banging away with their ten-pound hammers, the noise in the dockyards was deafening; like the others we plugged our ears with wet paper each morning and communicated by sign language only while in the dockyards. A well-established set of signs and symbols existed, and, once familiar with these, we could carry on lengthy, wordless conversations. For the first time, the language barrier between us was not a problem.

Japanese men and women alike worked at the dockyards and the drab, bow-legged women in the shapeless track suits were given few privileges.

Near by, a young woman stopped sorting nuts and bolts to remove lice from her hair. There was an instant roar from her hancho who leapt at her in a fury and punched and slapped viciously before kicking her back to work.

Watching this sordid scene in some astonishment, I blinked and reminded myself that this was Nagasaki—the setting of Puccini’s hauntingly beautiful “Madame Butterfly.”

In the camp we were issued with a Red Cross army greatcoat and two more warm blankets. It was October 1944, and it was amazing to realize that for the first time since February 1942 the Japanese were accepting responsibility for our welfare. In the past two and a half years the Japanese had supplied food only, and had left it to the ingenuity of the prisoners to find their own clothing, bedding, toilet necessities, and medicine.

When the Flying Fortresses droned overhead, the docks cleared as if by magic. Hundreds of us crammed into the big concrete bunker, and the great steel door slammed shut as we listened tensely for the crump crump of the bombs that we felt must surely fall on such a target.

But all that happened was that Rigor Mortis said, with complete conviction, “Here you all die, huh?” Having effortlessly captured our attention, he explained, “First come the planes, huh, then the American ships, huh, and then you all die here, huh?” As he spoke, he waved his arm around at the thick concrete walls and the heavy steel doors. Even to men who had survived Thailand and the *Byoki M.aru,* the position looked pretty grim. “Perhaps we all die here on this island, huh?” he added sadly. So gloomy was his tone and so reminiscent of “Happy Harry” Smith that spontaneous cries of “You’ll never get off the island” rang out, and several hundred men wheezed and whooped with laughter. And they laughed even more when Rigor Mortis blinked his eyes in surprise and said, “Hey, you guys don’t unnerstan what I said, huh?” After that he never had quite the same confidence when dealing with us, and often after giving us the simplest of orders he would add anxiously, “Now you guys from Orstralia unnerstan what I said, huh?”

The life of an electric driller was an interesting and a dangerous one.

Two men formed a team, each holding a handle that protruded from either side of the drill, and our task was to drill holes through the plates and girders to allow the rivets to be hammered into place. The danger lay in the fact that unless one had considerable skill (and luck) the bit would jam and the drill would do its best to buck and plunge out of our grip. When this happened, as it often did, on a narrow plank some ninety feet

above the ground, it was a dicey business, and required teamwork and determination to stay put on the plank.

Time after time I was selected by the Japanese drillers to accompany them on very hazardous work, and often I cursed what was apparently just sheer bad luck. Then I discovered that the Japanese believe ascending numbers to be very lucky and that my P.O.W. number, 2367, was a particularly well-omened sequence. This fact caused me many nerve-racking hours, but as a compensation, on several occasions after reaching a most inaccessible position, my slant-eyed partner in crime and I would sleep for most of the day, secure in the knowledge that neither hancho nor Gestapo would trouble us in this eyrie.

The months passed and the Thailand men lost their tan. The newcomers, originally far darker than the Japanese, had stood out from the rest of the camp. Then, for a while, we matched the golden skin of the Japanese, but after that inevitably we acquired the dockyard pallor of the old hands.

Under camp rules the doctors were permitted to keep men off work if their temperature reached a certain figure but in our first months at Fukuoka 2, the Australians had registered such surprising temperatures that we had to register at least two degrees higher than the rest of the camp to escape work. Now our tropics thinned blood became acclimatized and we were put on the same scale as the rest of the camp. At one stage in Thailand I had had eighteen separate medical complaints at the one time and my range included ulcers, scabies, beriberi, malaria, dysentery, gingivitis, vitaminosis, conjunctivitis, colic, debility, dermatitis, plus others which I cannot now recall. And of course there was always the raw tongue and the weeping scrotum.

Now, in the land of the Nippon warrior gods, all these afflictions vanished as if by legerdemain.

Christmas Day was marked by an issue of one Red Cross parcel between six men, and on New Year's Day we received an incredible one parcel per man. This was my first Red Cross issue in almost three years. Men long unfamiliar with any but rice grain coffee drank Nescafe and groped their way to their bunks with swimming heads and slurred speech. American cigarettes made us stagger like drunkards.

The year 1945 came floating into Nagasaki on a snowstorm and

I lay awake watching the snow swirl by the window, wondering what the coming year held for us.

Would it be liberation and life? Or would our end come in the camp air-raid shelters when the invasion began?

One thing was certain and the rest was lies.… The Japanese never bluffed and the air-raid shelters with their surprisingly heavy doors, also had surprisingly large vents on the top. And the drums of gasoline stacked near by held a blood-chilling threat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE COLDEST WINTER that Japan had known for many years gripped the land with icy fingers. We had army boots and greatcoats from the Red Cross, but because the civilians were so thinly clad we were not permitted to wear either the greatcoats or the boots outside the camp. So we lined up on parade in our thin papiermâché suits, while the snow fell on our ridiculous caps and trickled down our necks. Then the Japanese would check and re-check—for they counted no better in Japan than in Thailand—and long before we were free to trudge through the slush to the dockyards our sockless feet would be numb in the stiff, wet canvas shoes. And now as we rubbed down in the raw at five in the morning the snow swirled in through the open window, and the wind from across the grey sea knifed our bodies.

P.O.W. 1704 was a small Dutch-Indonesian soldier named Peters and to this boy came horror as stark as anything from the Middle Ages. For on 27 December, Peters was careless and started to step through a gap in the side of a ship just as a crane driver lowered a section of plate into position. The result was that of a guillotine, though not as clean, and his leg was almost completely sheared off some three inches above the ankle. Peters was carried into the Japanese hospital and his leg was amputated. But this was late 1944 and—there were no anaesthetics!

He was brought back to camp but after a few days it was discovered that the filthy operation had allowed gangrene to set in and that the leg had to come off above the knee if his life were to be saved. The American doctor performed a first-rate operation in the camp, but again there was no anaesthetic.

Incredibly, this slip of a boy survived both operations but Fate had not yet done with him and on 3 May 1945, Peters was carried into trie Japanese hospital for an emergency appendix operation. This time he was given a spinal injection but it completely failed to take effect and his screams were almost unbearable.

Snow and wind whistled through the dockyards, too, and often we had to shake snow off the drill before we could start work. Hunger sharpened already keen appetites, and food and warmth

became our obsessions. We wore every stitch that we possessed and waddled to work swathed in three or four sets of clothing plus a blanket underneath. Men huddled against the riveters' fires as if held by a magnet, and often worked with unprecedented vigour to keep from freezing. In January the temperature was often below zero and we shivered miserably and longed for the warmth of Thailand.

The Japanese hospital was a place of horror that appalled our Western eyes. The dockyard workers lived in shacks provided by the Company, and if they were admitted to the hospital their whole family moved in with them and lived around the hospital bed. We often had to carry the accident cases to this charnel house, where the doctors were covered in blood like slaughtermen, and the nurses slopped around the wet, slush-covered floor in bare feet. Hygiene was nonexistent, drugs and anaesthetics were seldom available, and hot water was regarded as harmful and its use avoided. A primitive toilet leaned against the dispensary, and from the toilet came maggots that crawled up the passage and on to the bandages that littered the wet floor.

We learnt from the Americans to fill tins with sea water, hang them against a riveters' fire, and then collect the greyish deposit left after the water had boiled away. After three years, we knew once more the taste of salt.

The bombers came over consistently—so high that they scarcely seemed to move, and so thrilling that emotion brought a lump to the throat. By now it was accepted that the gods had granted some strange immunity to Nagasaki, and the air-raid sirens were never sounded. The incredible Japanese would look up at the silver planes on the way to slaughter their brothers and say admiringly, "Americano number one."

But there was no lack o£ spirit here, and often we saw the school children drilling with bamboo poles, for even children were to be used to repel the hated invader of the homeland. And we saw little tots of three to six years given sharp bamboo spears and rehearsed in the art of jabbing their spears into the eyes of wounded enemy soldiers. It was cruel and horrible, but there was something magnificently barbaric about it too. Japan was a tiger at bay.

The food position deteriorated badly as the Allies closed in.

Rice was replaced with barley and millet, and although we occasionally had whalemeat or octopus in the "stew," vegetables became almost non-existent. The bitter cold put an edge to our appetites and produced strange reactions. One man would never eat until he had three meals stored up. The fact that the meals often went sour did not deter him in the least. Sometimes in the night we would be awakened by a jingling and become sleepily aware that almost crazed by hunger, he was eating in the dark with such enthusiasm as to set the "dog tags" and medals jingling on the cord round his neck.

"Cocky" Easton was short, barrel-chested, and built like a gorilla, with a hairy chest to match. He was rather bald, and cross-eyed, and several of his teeth were missing as a result of wild brawls in his home town of Cunnamulla. Cocky also had a heart as big as himself and was the brightest and staunchest of companions. One night he jumped on the table in his underpants to illustrate a most unlikely story that he was telling, and just at that moment Boko soft-footed into the room. There was a stunned silence as the Japanese took in the barrel chest with the thick mat of hair, the long arms, and the wild look of Cocky looming above him. Then, in a most creditable imitation of a monkey, Boko scratched his armpits, gave a little jig, and shambled out of the room. For Boko, the Sergeant-Major was sometimes Boko, the buffoon.

The Americans in the camp were unfortunate in that their core of quiet, decent men was overshadowed by a minority of gangster types. Included in their number were twenty or thirty convicts who had been released from the American military prison when the Japanese took Wake Island. These gangsters, or "rice bandits" as they were called, had organized a variety of rackets, chief of which was stealing from both the Japanese and the P.O.W. kitchens. After several warnings, the Japanese began to withhold a meal from the entire camp each time food was stolen.

We completely missed nine or ten meals in this manner, and on one bitterly cold and wet yasume day, no food whatever was served. But eventually some of the rice bandits were caught by the Japanese and severely punished, and after that the increase in our rice ration was quite noticeable.

The bitter cold, the absurd rubbing down of naked bodies at

dawn, and the draughty dockyards, brought the inevitable results, and at one stage over a hundred P.O.W.s were being treated for pneumonia. Gunner Bill McFarlane had survived the harsh testing of the last three years but now he lay critically ill with pneumonia and the American doctor said clearly, "Unless he receives food such as fish, condensed milk, biscuits, and butter, he will die!"

This was like asking for gold, but Bob Beaumont and his mates took blood-curdling risks that they would never have taken for themselves and in some miraculous manner stole the food from the Japanese. But strange thoughts had taken possession of Bill's sick mind and he refused to eat "because the food has been stolen." Thus Bill McFarlane died at Nagasaki with the food that would have saved him lying untouched by his side.

At the rear of the camp, reclaiming of the land went on as it had for decades. Two men shovelled earth from a hill into a rail truck, pushed it to the water's edge and tipped it in. Where would it all end, we wondered? Would these incredible people finish with a flat Japan, twice as large?

Ship A4l was completed and launched. There were speeches and cheering, and the workers were given two mandarins each to mark the occasion. But production lagged sadly. The Japanese organized speed competitions between the riveting teams. For one day, Japanese and P.O.W. riveters alike worked like men possessed to gain the prize of bread rolls. Then they lapsed back into their usual snaillike pace, while scores of men were engaged for days pulling out the faulty rivets that had been hammered home during the race.

I had always fancied myself as having a bad head for heights, but we worked so often in dizzy positions, that the day came when I needed tools and walked casually over a twelve-inch plank laid across a hold, rather than walk the long way around. Somewhat to my own surprise, I found that half-way across the narrow plank with a ninety-foot drop on either side, I had stopped to light a cigarette.

Ginty and Pop, like most old men, were occasionally off-colour, and on these days they would often hand us their lunch. Their meals were pathetic—a wooden box of plain rice with one or two pieces of pickled vegetable on top.

On yasume days each room was allowed the use of an old wind-up gramophone for half an hour. The records were mainly rubbish but they included Strauss's "Roses of the South," which everyone liked, and all the way down the corridor you could hear this tune, a haunting echo of a life that now seemed almost a dream.

My work was not always demanding. I spent one day in the camp garden, entrusted by Boko with the responsible task of clapping two sticks together in order to frighten away the birds.

One night "Lofty" Foote and Pat Haydon woke in the night and set off for the toilets, forgetting, in their stupor, to hang up their "benjo" tags. They were caught by a guard with a sense of humour, and when I set off for the benjo at two o'clock I found Lofty kneeling on the cold concrete, clad only in a long shirt, while Pat's chore, under the eye of a grinning guard, was to march up and down the corridor, tapping Lofty briskly on the head each time he passed. A stream of men passed down the corridor, vastly amused at the tableau of the graven image and the clockwork toy. Men grinned as they passed and asked, "Saying your prayers, Lofty?" while the unfortunate man gritted his teeth in helpless rage and winced each time his clockwork comrade tapped his head.

Ginty and Pop were elderly and mellow, and would have been the same had they not been Catholics, but on one occasion Ginty was so enraged by a no-hoper who had no sense of fair-play, that he became completely exasperated and lightly kicked him. The kick, delivered in sandshoes, was harmless, but Ginty saw me watching the incident, and, ashamed, made an old man's gesture of futile irritation with himself. I looked at the old chap solemnly, raised my eyes piously, and made a gesture as of a priest giving absolution, at the same time mouthing the words, *In nomine Patris.* Ginty's head went down, and for a moment he surveyed me owlishly over the top of his cheap, metal-rimmed glasses. Then he suddenly grinned, made an extremely vulgar gesture, and walked away wheezing to himself.

. . .

Piet was an Indonesian who had been in the Dutch army in

Java, but now he had leprosy and lived alone in a hut on the side of the camp. One day, the medical orderly who treated Piet said to me, “The leper is a very lonely person, Harrison. Why don’t you write to him?” Because the orderly did so much it seemed churlish to refuse, even though I shuddered at the thought. For several months Piet and I corresponded in English, although I shivered to receive his letters and burnt them almost immediately. But often as we marched out to work, Piet would be at the door of his hut to wave, and his dark, coarsening face would light up with a smile. And when the Japanese took Piet away on 20 April and shot him, I felt grateful that I had been allowed to be a friend during his last lonely months.

There were too many dockyard rules for even the noblest of us not to be in trouble now and again and a “Gestapo” guard peeping through a rivet hole caught me sitting on my haunches instead of standing upright for twelve hours as required. Despite Pop’s protests, I was hauled off to the Navy Office where Rigor Mortis asked, “Do you deserve to be punished, huh?” Having been warned that denials led to double punishments, I unhappily answered, “Yes” and threw myself on the mercy of the slant-eyed court.

After a short discussion between the laughing Kaigoons, Rigor Mortis—who had seen too many films—said deadpan, “The sentence is that you will be taken from this place, huh, and given two bats across the ass.” Almost I expected him to add “and may God have mercy on your soul.”

Watched by a gaggle of grinning Kaigoons, I toed the line and was given two tremendous wallops over the buttocks with a baseball bat wielded by a muscular sailor, who took it as a personal affront that my heel marks on landing were twelve inches behind the line marking the current record holder’s prowess.… But I felt as if I had been kicked by a horse and I was sick and churned up in the stomach for days.

At this stage I had an escape from death so miraculous that, in all humility, it could only be explained as Divine intervention. I was drilling with Alan Day some hundred feet up on top of a ship on which the deck plates had yet to be laid. On occasions such as this, where our only foothold was a three-inch wide girder erected ready to support the plates, we would work on a heavy

plank twelve inches wide and about twenty feet long laid across the girders. Alan and I had finished one stretch and I stood up to pull the plank to a new position. I placed both feet firmly on one of the girders and bent down to half lift, half slide the plank between my legs. As the plank was heavy and had to be dragged over the girders, which were three feet apart, I took a firm grip, braced myself, and heaved.

Just at this moment Alan Day, trying to be helpful, lifted up the other end of the plank. The result was spectacular. I had heaved back, expecting to have to counteract both weight and friction. Instead the plank came so easily that I tumbled backwards, did a back somersault through the girders, and was on my way to the bilge plates a hundred feet below. I felt no shock or fright; everything dissolved into a rush and a blur. A second later there was a bump and I recovered my wits to find myself lying across a twelve-inch plank, still dangling some ninety feet above the bilge plates.

When we drilled from underneath a girder we usually suspended a twelve inch wide plank by rope about six feet under the girder and worked from that. In all this huge hold there were only two of these planks roped under the girders and I had just happened to hit one and balance on it. Shaking my head to clear my scattered wits, I grabbed the rope and pulled myself to the top to meet an ashen-faced Alan Day and a gaping Korean riveter. Within minutes we were back at work again, but human nature is a strange thing, and a part of me wondered wistfully why I couldn't at least have escaped with a "cushy" injury to keep me off work for a few months. But one glance down at the three foot high bilge plates that yawned in rows like shark's teeth told me why.

I organized an impromptu concert one yasume night and, as the guards did not interfere, this became a regular feature of yasume nights and visitors flocked in their dozens to Room 26. I acted as compere, and although we had few real artists, our audiences were anything but critical and there was always laughter and nostalgia. I could not sing for nuts but I had a pleasing success by taking some of the well-known Japanese camp phrases, putting the words to a tune such as "Santa Lucia," and presenting myself as the Japanese tenor, "Waka-moto." The

reception to these offerings was all that any artist could desire, and one one particularly gratifying night two guards outside the door had tears running down their cheeks.

Frank Donat was our one true artist and had a fine tenor voice. No memory of Nagasaki is complete without the picture of Frank singing "Marta," his *tour de force.* Frank brought joy to us all and even the guards often put in their requests—usually for "Marta."

Spring came to Nagasaki, and the snow and the slush disappeared. Like a promise of things to come, the cherry blossom appeared, and for the first time I began to see what the land of Madame Butterfly could be like. But there was little cheer that spring in a Japan that was slowly strangling in the grip of her enemies. Rice and vegetables virtually disappeared from our menu, and a coarse barley became our staple diet.

My health at this stage was *too* good, and, weary of the perpetual strain of the dockyards, I looked about for a means of getting a few days off work. A favourite method was to put pepper in the eyes to simulate a "flash" that dockyard workers often suffered from as a result of the glare of the welder's torch. I flinched from adopting this method, but finally decided to scald my leg with boiling water. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak, and after obtaining a mug of boiling water I spent an agonizing period screwing up my courage. But at last I gritted my teeth and dashed the water on my leg. The result was pure anticlimax. I had spent so much time temporizing that the water was off the boil and hardly even stung. After that I realized the law that protects fools and drunkards was working overtime on my behalf, and decided that apparently nothing very dreadful was meant to happen to me in this particular war.

A festival took place in which the Japanese payed homage to, and thanked, the fish that they had caught and eaten during the year. Men and women smiled at each other and bowed and many small gifts were exchanged. As I walked down the dockyard I was stopped by a Japanese who smiled and gave me two mandarins. It was a brief and charming glimpse of the other—and truer—Japan.

"Pop," the Catholic hancho, came to me and in sign language asked whether there was a priest among the workers in the dockyard. When I looked at him inquiringly, he took off his cap

to show the bristly, grey hairs and with his chalk he wrote 68 on the deck. This was clear enough—Pop was 68, and a Catholic, and he wanted Confession.

I told him that the priest was in the camp but that I would ask him to come. Pop nodded eagerly, and as he shuffled away in his cheap, split-toed rubber shoes with the ridiculous puttees, I wondered what sort of a Confession it would be? Pop," the Japanese hancho and "Pop," the Australian priest, neither speaking a word of the other's language. And what sins would the old man have to confess? Not sins of passion, surely. "Forgive me, Father, for today I kicked a P.O.W.…" No, not that. Somehow I thought that the language problem would not be important … one would confess in Japanese, the other would grant absolution to the unknown sins in Latin and there would be joy in the heart of each.

But Time was to beat us.

Boko had been a detective in Tokyo and was full of tricks. He would soft-foot into the room at night, and, if everything were in order he would walk to the window, ostensibly looking out across the bay, but in reality watching our reflections in the window. Yet somehow, I fancied that many a crime had gone unsolved in Boko's district.

Peter Dawson, Bob Beaumont, and Frank Donat went to the camp gardens one night "bandicooting" potatoes. They lay flat on the ground in the moonlight, shovelling potatoes through their flies into the legs of their trousers when suddenly Boko—a squat figure of Justice—materialized before them. With a growl, he demanded to know what was going on. In sheer desperation, Peter Dawson held up a small piece of grass and said, very weakly, "Weeding!"

Boko's face broke into a pleased smile and he patted them on the head with an approving "Joto" (good). He walked back to the barracks with them and not once did it occur to the great detective to dwell on the oddity of men weeding a garden at midnight, or to wonder at the swollen, elephantine legs of the three men, or to be intrigued at the three flies that gaped indecently open in the bright moonlight.

The grip of the enemy was now closing on Japan, and the

industry of the country was coming to a halt. Another ship was launched, but no new keel was laid, for iron and steel had now become too scarce to waste on ships that might never be launched. Repelling the inevitable invasion was the pressing need —not building ships that might never have a sea to sail on.

So it was that some two hundred of us left Nagasaki on 20 June 1945. It was rumoured that we were on our way to the coal mines. We left with mixed feelings, for in many respects Fukuoka 2 had been a good camp. It was only later when we learnt of conditions in other camps in Japan that we realized the debt we owed to Boko for his humane influence on the other guards. Many another camp in Japan had been a place of horror, fit to rank with camps in Thailand.

We left so suddenly that there was no opportunity of saying farewell to Ginty and Pop—two old men to whom I had never spoken one word, but whom I had come to know well and to regard with affection.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AS USUAL THE Japanese civilians gazed at us in undisguised curiosity as we rowdily assembled on the railway platform after an eleven-hour journey from Nagasaki. Their eyes opened even wider when the guard barked, "bungo" (number) and the *ichi—ni—san—chi—go—rokos* rippled down the line. We were showing off a little, but none the less, it never failed to amaze me how men who were unable to number off in English without repeated mistakes, suddenly became fast and faultless in Japanese.

It was barely possible that the fist in the face that so often followed a mistake on a Japanese parade had some slight bearing on the matter.

We marched four pleasant miles through small farms and green fields, and the fresh spring air and the delicate cherry blossom made us hopeful of an equally attractive camp. But we shuddered when we came to the cobbled streets of Nakarma and smelt the foul canal and saw the flimsy, squalid dwellings. The abandoned pit heads and slag heaps left us in little doubt that our new role would be that of cdal miners.

To dispel any slight doubt, we found that our bamboo-stockaded camp was perched on a slag heap in the centre of a two mile wide valley. It was occupied by several hundred dispirited Dutch troops who had left Singapore several weeks before the *Byoki Maru,* and had reached Japan in seventeen days.

The huts were dark and gritty and, as everyone slept on the floor, there was a strict rule that all shoes were to be removed before entering. One good feature was that meals were eaten in a communal dining hut, with long pine tables and forms, and the view from where we ate was pleasant, taking in miles of open rice fields that stretched to the hills.

Nakarma was a poverty-stricken little town dominated by the mine that cast its ugly blight on the grimy dwellings and their grey occupants. In these last months of the war, food was desperately short, and in the town there were perpetual food queues. The situation was hardly any brighter in the camp, and our main diet was a coarse rice and weak cabbage stew.

The Dutch painted a grim picture of mining conditions, and said the mine was in such a deplorable state that it had been abandoned by the Japanese, and only the availability of free P.O.W. labour and the country's desperate need had caused them to reopen the shaft. It was with very mixed feelings, therefore, that after a short course of instruction in Japanese mining terminology we assembled for our first day as coal miners.

We gathered our batteries and the lamps that strapped to our heads, and clambered into the tiny metal trucks known as "skips" that were connected by a cable to a winch at the pit head. There was a lurch and a rattle and down we went, connected to the upper world only by our steel umbilical cord. The daylight in the tunnel above us shrank to a pinpoint and then was gone, and the dank, oozing, concrete-lined walls glistened eerily in the light thrown out by our lamps.

Half-way down the skips stopped, and we saw before us a section of tunnel so low that the empty skips passed under with only inches to spare. From here on we had to walk to the coal face and we remembered how the Dutch had told us of this rock subsidence, and of how six men had been decapitated in the first skip sent down after the silent settling of the huge rock mass.

We slipped and slithered down the greasy sloping tunnel for more than a mile, and then the concrete-lined walls gave way to a rough tunnel shored up in a haphazard way by timber. Water oozed in from top and sides and made the clay on the floor slippery. We fell repeatedly as our feet went from under us.

About a mile down, the tunnel rose to follow the seam of coal, and in the valley so formed we found a forty-yard stretch of water almost four feet deep. There was nothing for it but to wade through this cold and dirty lake with our boxes of rice held high, cursing mightily when our toes stubbed on the unseen, miniature rails and sleepers below. Then the tunnel climbed again, and we waded out. A few minutes' walk brought us to the coal face, dripping wet and exhausted—ready to start our eight-hour shift.

Our work was clearly defined; with picks and bars we prised out coal, and with shovels we loaded the skips, which were pushed along the tiny rails to where they were coupled up and drawn to the top by winch. The work was hard, the atmosphere was foul, and the Japanese workers were bad-tempered and

violent, but, overshadowing all, was the constant fear of a “cave in.”

As the coal face advanced, the tunnel was shored up behind us, but even timber was scarce in the Japan of July 1945, and the timber sent down to prop up this groaning, creaking shaft was almost entirely of the green sapling variety. When hard coal was encountered, electric drills were used to bore holes in the coal face and then gelignite sticks were inserted and the whole face was blown up. This usually took place while we ate our cold and tasteless rice, so that the dust and fumes had settled before we resumed work. We came to expect five or six fall-ins a week, and one trusted to luck and a “sixth sense” to keep out of danger.

The return journey was a tiring one, but I came to prefer it, because at least if you fell forward you could break your fall with your hands. It was with a sigh of pure relief, that we tumbled into the skips and were drawn up into the open air—unbelievably clean and sharp after the atmosphere of the mine.

I was on day shift in the early weeks and was thankful for this, for the nights were as stirring as one could wish. Night after night, the huge bombers flew in a path high over our valley and the searchlights on the hills either side of the camp would fix them and hold them, like silver moths, in their beams. Then would come a flash from the unseen anti-aircraft guns in the hills, and we could follow the tracers of the shells quite clearly. From this distance, they appeared to travel in a slow red spiral, and it was fascinating to watch shell and plane coming remorselessly together. Then would come the explosion and the mushroom of smoke, and we waited tensely, but always the planes flew on, and later we would hear the thump of the bombs dropping. Long after everything was quiet there would be flames in the sky and a glow over the hills.

The battering that came night after night from the bombers left no doubt that the Allies were near and that the war was coming to a climax. But would it come in time? And would it end with an invasion? For outside the air-raid shelters with the vents on top and the one single door of heavy oak, stood six eighty-gallon drums of petrol and diesolene. There were no motor vehicles in Nakarma and only one conclusion was possible, even though the mind shut away the thought.

Food became even shorter and the cabbage stew gave way to seaweed soup. The Japanese were given the seaweed, and we were given the scrapings from the rocks. It was slimy and full of little shells, but it was salty and we forced it down.

From the sliding up and down the mine tunnel, our rubber shoes wore out and most of us made wooden clogs held to the foot by a strip of rubber or leather. These were hopeless for climbing up and down the shaft so now we slithered and fell even more as our bare feet slipped from under us on the wet, greasy clay.

We learnt to recognize the signs that heralded a fall of part of the tunnel, but all of us experienced falls of rock within feet of where we worked, and it needed luck rather than good judgement to survive.

Three Dutch and two Japanese were killed by falls in my first week at the mine, and then, on 13 July, the luck of Cedric James ran out. Cedric was our fittest man beyond doubt and his strongly built frame had carried him for nearly three and a half years without a day's illness, under conditions that would have killed an ox. Now Cedric was hit by a sudden rockfall and although we did all we could, he died four days later—only weeks before the end.

Jack MacIntosh was a rarity in that he was a Sergeant-Major who was both liked and respected. He was also a very determined man. So determined that when he and a couple of others found that they were expected to win coal from a shaft some two feet under water, Jack baulked. He indicated to the Japanese that they could expect no coal until the water was pumped out. So strong was Jack's personality that this strike was allowed to continue for three incredible days, and on three successive shifts Jack and his team just sat in the mine all day.

But on the fourth day, a group of Japanese waited down the mine for them and fell on them with clubs and iron bars. There were tense moments of scuffling and struggling in the dark, wet tunnel, and most of the weapons were thrown into the black water. But it was death to strike a Japanese, and the boys could only defend themselves without hitting back at men who punched and clubbed viciously. Not one man was capable of work that day, and several, including Jack MacIntosh, were so badly beaten

that they were never sent to the mine again.

By far the most interesting personalities in the camp were a small group of Asiatic prisoners who were members of the Royal Air Force and had served as ground staff in Singapore. Their happy natures and the bright personalities that bubbled with the joy of life—even in Nakarma—drew me like a magnet and thus I came to know Khaw Kok Teen, Loh Peng Hong, Kessler the Indian, and the two Malay boys, Mahomet Moyadene Merican (Dene) and his brother, Puteh.

Now there was a further twelve and a half per cent cut in the rice ration for civilians as well as prisoners, and resentment spread in the town and among the mine workers. Vegetables were replaced by seaweed, and parties left the camp each day to search among the fields and along the canal banks for edible weeds. The Australian party often returned with "pigface" (portulacca weed), but the Dutch party reported little success, as the Japanese civilians had often been there before them.

Bob Beaumont was feeling far from well and lay in his blankets listlessly contemplating the prospects of a slimy seaweed soup for lunch. He brightened considerably as Peter Dawson entered the hut with a smile on his broad face and a tasty looking morsel of fried meat in his dixie.

"Here mate, get this into you and you'll feel better," said Peter.

Bob ate with relish and then smacked his lips.

"You beaut, Peter," he said appreciatively. "What was it, a chook ?" Peter grinned. "Nothing as common as that old son. That was the liver of a dog we caught this morning."

And one of the camp institutions was the Dutchman who ate for ten hours each day. He was a permanently sick man, relieved of all duties, and he ate his three bowls of rice per day, one grain at a time.

All day, every day, from breakfast to "lights out," he munched away, timing each meal to finish just as the next was being issued.

On 24 July at 10 p.m. there was a sound we had not heard before and we rushed out into the moonlight to see twenty single-engined planes go "whooshing" over the camp. Now, beyond doubt, we knew that our comrades were near and it was a most

emotional moment. I felt the pinprick of tears behind my eyes but there was a great exultation too, and I wanted to shout, “They’re coming; our brave and glorious brothers are coming.”

Instead of which, being Australian, I looked at Tom Hallahan and grumbled, “Lucky bastards, Tom. They’ll be home for a steak supper in a few hours.”

But that night again I had the nightmare that I had known both in Malaya and in Thailand. It was late in the war and the Japanese were attacking. We fired at their troops and their tanks, but still the stocky little men kept coming, and suddenly, with a sinking feeling, I thought, “We’re not going to win after all. Malaya was no fluke—they’re just too good.” Then I woke with the bitter taste of second defeat in my mouth, and, despite the stomach that growled for food and the drums of petrol by the air-raid shelter, it was with a warm flow of relief that I woke to reality.

August came. The night raids dwindled off and the bombers began to make arrogant daylight attacks; they ignored the anti-aircraft fire and were seldom molested by fighter planes. I was on night shift at this stage and was stirred by the sight of these tremendous planes and the raids that grew daily more heavy and continuous. Often we felt the jar of bombs and saw the black smoke rising high into the air, and when darkness fell there were flames in the distance and a sky that glowed an ominous red.

The food position in the camp grew desperate. Rice was replaced by a coarse millet from Korea, and seaweed soup and the portulacca weed became our staple diet. The Japanese hancho in charge of the cookhouse tried appealing to the civilians of Nakarma for food, but the townspeople, already battened on by the soldiers who went from house to house commandeering food, had nothing to give. We received ten sen a day for our labours in the mine, but the only items we were able to buy with this wealth were small sticks that had been dipped in cinnamon.

Hunger gnawed at us night and day but there was the occasional, gloriously insane exception. Frank Donat, Bob Beaumont, Gordon Anderson, and “Wimpy” Bye were on a weed gathering party when they came across a farm growing tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, etc, and after a gargantuan feast, they filled their pockets for their mates in camp. On the way back, Frank

Donat's ill-gotten gains were observed by the guards and he was thoroughly slapped while the rest of his partners in crime hurriedly jettisoned their share of the loot. At the guardhouse, Frank was called out by the Camp Commandant who said, "My soldiers tell me that you steal. Why do you do such a horrible thing?"

Frank replied simply, "Because I am hungry."

The Commandant, who was quite a good type of Japanese soldier, immediately sent to the Japanese kitchen for three heaped bowls of rice and urged Frank to eat. Frank, with his belly groaning from the feast of tomatoes, cucumbers, and other vegetables, had no option but to eat with every indication of being a starving man. Alas, his acting was his downfall for no sooner had he finished the last bowl with a sigh of pure relief, than the Commandant presented him with his own supper—two long bread rolls and another heaped bowl of rice. Frank chewed on with glazed eyes, still acting the part of a starving man, and at last the ordeal was over and he was able to waddle with his obscenely distended belly to his hut. Just as he arrived, ghastly in colour, Wimpy Bye walked in still smarting over the loss of the jettisoned vegetables and completely unaware of Frank's experience. "Bloody bad luck we had to dice those vegetables." Wimpy said, "but there's some pumpkins growing not far from the guardhouse. How about we go out and pinch a few, Frank?" And he wondered why his good friend groaned and cast him a look of pure hate.

Now, at the mine we worked in slow motion and our dread was of being caught in a fall, so close to the end. It was a tremendous strain on the nerves and never more so than when we ate our cold millet during the lunch break with the mine as hushed as a tomb. Then we could distinctly hear the timbers creaking and groaning from the unseen pressure and often as we watched, tensed, the green poles would silently bend. Or sometimes the telltale flakes of coal would drop on us from the ceiling, betraying the hidden force bearing on it, and then, as one, we would leap to our feet and scramble for the safety of the main tunnel with its solid supports.

Such was the strain that many of the painfully overworked, emaciated men would get to their feet and start pottering about

with picks and shovels during their thirty-minute lunch break. Anything rather than the claustrophobic, tomblike silence.

The night of 7 August was a stirring one, for a huge silver plane came over flying high. As the beam of the searchlights held it almost over our camp we saw the bomb bays open, and not long afterwards leaflets began to drop into the camp. The guards rushed around threateningly, but we managed to read one hastily before we were driven into our huts. The leaflet announced that the war in Europe was over, and warned that the whole might of the free world would now be turned on Japan unless she surrendered. It was death to be caught with one of these, and we hastily threw the leaflets back on the ground, but the message stayed warm in our hearts and acted like a tonic.

The next day 190 huge bombers with fighter escort passed over the camp, and the anti-aircraft fire was heavy. We saw one parachute floating down but, strangely, no one saw a plane hit. The raid went on for nearly three hours, and long after the planes had gone the smoke hung in an evil pall like the scene after a bushfire. And the incredible Japanese—soldiers and civilians alike—shook their heads admiringly and said, “Churchill number one.”

As we came up to the mine on 10 August we noted with surprise that the Japanese flags were carrying black strips on the top. A party of men had just emerged.

“Watch that bloody tunnel,” Frank Christie said anxiously. “The timbers are creaking and breaking.”

We found to our disgust that the hancho in charge of the winch had panicked during the previous day’s raid and had left the winch unattended. As a result, it was out of action and we would have to walk the entire way down instead of riding in the skips for nearly half of it. We grumbled and cursed all the way down until, with possibly ten minutes’ walk left, there was a rumble and a rush of air and we found on arriving that the whole face where we were to have worked had fallen in.

The Japanese in charge of us that shift was a savage and powerful man and was said to have lost a brother in an air raid. He drove us unmercifully that night and made us work in suicidal positions in order to clear the fallen rock and rubble. Repeatedly he bashed us and I thought how like a scene from Dante’s

“Inferno” it must have been. Our lamps shone eerily through the thick dust and showed his half-naked, sweating figure (for it was always warm and close at this depth) lashing out in a fury. The hazy scene had a nightmare quality about it, but the men who fell and the blood that mingled with the coaldust was real enough, and we who left our blood behind that night, can truly say that somewhere in Japan there is a part forever Australia.

And now there were raids all the time, and dog fights to see, and cannon fire to hear, and we wondered how long any country, even Japan, could take such a battering.

On 14 August we did what was destined to be our last shift at the mine. An hour before we left, a huge rock fell without any warning and missed a white-faced Frank Christie by eighteen inches and me by no more than a yard. I was rather pleased at the calmness with which I had faced the situation until later when I heard Andy Malcolm reporting the incident, “Fair dinkum, if Harrison had opened his mouth any wider he could have caught the rock in it and saved Frank getting such a fright.”

The next day was yasume day. We returned to the camp in the morning and tumbled into our beds, too weary to do more than note with slight surprise that there were no air raids taking place. Dust-covered, tired, and hungry, we were asleep almost as soon as we pulled the blankets over us.

We slept like men drugged until two o’clock in the afternoon when we were awakened by the hum of voices. It was 15 August 1945—exactly three and a half years since Singapore had surrendered on that black day of 15 February 1942. Irritably I turned over and tried to sleep, but there was an unusual quality of excitement in the babble of voices that eventually banished sleepiness.

Bill Jowett stuck a fair head out of the blankets and smiled wryly, “Looks as if we’ve had it now. Let’s see what the rowdy bastards are so excited about. Maybe the Yanks have dropped a bomb on old Ichi-Metre (a Japanese guard).”

We joined a group of men, who were arguing fiercely.

“I tell you it’s finished. The technicians always have to prepare the mine after a yasume day and they’ve been told not to go,” Bob Sharp said firmly.

“Bulldust. We’ll be digging coal tonight as usual, you’ll see,”

replied Rod Ross.

"Well, I'm certain that it's over. There hasn't been an air raid all day," argued Andy Malcolm hopefully.

"Yes, but don't forget there were no air raids for two days last week and it turned out that the typhoon had scattered the carriers," countered Pross Reid, ever the happy pessimist.

But others reported seeing the Japanese crying in the streets. And so it went on all the afternoon … hopes, doubts, fears….

Being an optimist I personally felt sure that the war must be over when Des Dawe told me that the drums of petrol had been taken from the camp as we slept that morning.

The big test would come at eight o'clock when the night shift came to hand in their "binto" boxes to be filled with rice for the meal eaten at the mine. If these were accepted and filled we would know that our hopes had been false. They were accepted, and gloom spread quickly over the camp. Then suddenly hopes rose again and the camp rang with cheers, for the Japanese had returned the boxes saying, "Tomorrow, all men yasume."

Still almost afraid to accept the implication fully, we crowded into the communal mess hut and suddenly men were producing long-hidden flags and singing national anthems with unprecedented fervour. And when the Japanese did not come bursting in to clear the room with rifle butts, I knew beyond doubt that we were to live after all.

The scene was unforgettable. Men jumped insanely up and down and gave each other fearful whacks on the shoulder. In a corner, two men stood on their heads, grinning foolishly, while at the back of a hut a small group of men—Australian and Dutch—knelt in prayer. Rupe Sawyer walked round and round in a daze, saying over and over, "We made it, we made it, we made it." We sang until we were hoarse, and when we paused for breath a Dutchman sang most beautifully, "When the lilacs bloom again, I'll come to you," and brought a lump to every throat.

I wandered out of the rowdy mess hut for a breath of fresh air and walked alone. I thought of Thailand, Pudu jail, the *Byoki Maru,* and many many other things. A guard bowed stiffly as I saluted, and I noticed that the bayonet had been removed from his rifle and that his peasant's face wore the strangest of looks as he listened to the exultant singing from the mess hut.

I looked into our hut, which was empty except for one man, who sat in a corner looking at a photo of his family. He was crying. In another hut, as I looked for Ed Smith, there was a man who had no photo, but he had written on a piece of paper, “My little Jan,” and under that, “Billy,” and he stared at the dirty scrap of paper as if it were a priceless treasure, while big tears rolled slowly and unnoticed down his face.

It was a magical night, the more so for its unexpectedness, and Frank Christie, stout comrade that he was, wrote in his diary, “Everyone excited, get a tight feeling in chest, too happy for words, up all night, very disconnected discussions of home, war, Thailand, how it ended, never shut eyes all night.”

Which just about tells it all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ODDLY ENOUGH, THE tremendous exultation of our first night as free men was followed by a most unsatisfactory and unsettled week that came somewhat as an anti-climax. The Japanese made no official admission that they had surrendered, and they still controlled the camp "to keep out the angry civilians." For this reason we were warned not to sing and dance, although this admonition came rather late and was completely ignored. It was a strange twilight period in which we were neither free men nor captives, and the balance of power between us and the Japanese was a delicate thing. We celebrated our freedom with feasts of millet and seaweed soup, and at night the Japanese fleas demonstrated that they, at least, had not surrendered, as they bit fiercely with a wholehearted, patriotic fervour.

As a practical demonstration of the new order, the guards set up an old table tennis table between the huts and began to play. Big Seiko was much better than the others and, seeking new worlds to conquer, he asked the "Australiah number one" to play him. I had played a lot of table tennis before the war and was pushed into the lists by my friends. Seiko was not top class by any means, and, as his drives all went in the same place, I had little trouble in floating them back, much to his mounting exasperation.

A regrettable tendency to show off led to my downfall, for, after returning several shots with studied nonchalance, I received one in just the right position and played the shot between my legs. There was an outburst of laughter from both P.O.W.s and the guards, and Seiko—sensitive, like all Japanese, to loss of face—let out a spontaneous "Kurra" and came at me with upraised bat and glaring eyes. I had come too far to risk possible death for striking a guard at this stage, and I unashamedly took to my heels and, for the last time, ran from the Japanese.

Major Rynaman held a church parade. "There are three times in life," he said, "when the average man gives his life to God and makes a new beginning—at his baptism, at his consecration, at his wedding. You men have been given a unique opportunity of a fourth chance to start a new life. See that you make the most of

it."

A surprisingly large number of men reported sick with high temperatures and stomachs that trembled and refused to digest food. "Nervous tension," said the medical men. "Too much excitement, too much emotion, not enough good food."

On 20 August 1945—five days after the end of the war—P.O.W. 39, a Dutchman, died as a result of a beating received in the mine a week previously.

At long last, on 22 August, just as the pessimists were lapsing back into gloom and doubt, we had the first official admission that the mightiest conflict the world had known had indeed ended. A haggard, white-faced Japanese Camp Commandant addressed the assembled prisoners of war and said that hostilities had ended on 18 August. He asked us to stay quietly in the camp until we could be taken home. Alas, we were to shatter these fond hopes, for Camp Nakarma became unique in that its occupants were to flow over half of Japan with all the happy zeal of tourists.

That afternoon the Japanese painted a huge sign and placed it on the roof … *PW Camp 21. 608 men.* "608 men. That's so they'll know how many blondes to drop," Colin Finkemeyer commented hopefully.

Two days after the birthday on which I turned twenty-seven the camp came to life with a bang, and from here on we were hardly to know a dull moment in Japan. At two o'clock two big four-engined planes came and circled over the camp. Excitement grew as we saw the sign *"PW supplies"* under the wings, and then men were waving, dancing, and cheering wildly.

After a victory roll over the camp, the big bombers came in low—too low—the bomb bays opened, and suddenly the sky was filled with parachutes, leaflets, and forty-gallon drums that came crashing down on the camp.

The supplies, which included food, clothing, medical supplies, vitamin tablets, and cigarettes, were packed in the drums and large wooden crates. Their weight proved too much for the cords that held them to the parachutes, and they tore free and plummeted down in lethal fashion. Even the few drums that remained attached to the 'chutes came down dangerously fast, for the drop was made far too low. The streets of Nakarma resembled

a battlefield strewn with clothing and littered with smashed tins of food.

Three Japanese civilians were killed and two were injured in this drop, but there were no casualties among the prisoners.

For the first time in three and a half years we knew again the exotic tastes of fruit salad, cream, chocolates, tinned meats, etc., and the accompanying leaflets that warned us not to overeat were of use only as toilet paper. Men ate with relish and enthusiasm in an ecstasy of gluttony until their distended bellies cried for mercy. Others smoked two and three cigarettes at once for the sheer joy and extravagance of it and then reeled white-faced to their beds.

Frank Christie recorded in his diary, "sing song till supper, no sleep all night as have indigestion." Heigh ho, civilization had caught up with us.

The food drop destroyed for all time the myth of "the angry Japanese civilians" waiting to tear us limb from limb, for much of the drop landed in the village and we went after it in very determined fashion. Several times we came on groups of Japanese dragging away our supplies and, rendered bold by the value of the prize, we took firm action to wrest it from them.

On 30 August, the B29s came again with two big drops, and there was another on the following day. By this time the Americans had become much more efficient, and most of the supplies landed intact, so that we began to live in luxury. During these drops the bamboo fences around the camp were enthusiastically knocked down, and at last we began to feel like free men.

During the second of these drops, a Japanese civilian near me committed *hara-kiri* of a most unusual nature. He had been helping us gather supplies, and when a crate of boots came floating down—deceptively small and slowly at a height—our little friend ran out like an eager puppy to catch the crate with upraised arms. Only in the last fifty feet or so did the true size and speed of the crate become apparent. By then it was too late, and he was killed instantly.

Attracted by the food and the American cigarettes, Japanese civilians came flocking to the camp, seeking employment. Gladly we turned them loose on the washing and cleaning duties; the

wheel had come full circle. Several of the boys employed Japanese as servants, paying them in food and cigarettes. Others could still not forgive and avoided any form of contact with them.

Although we had an ample supply of tinned goods, chocolates, etc., we lacked such things as fresh meat, eggs, vegetables, and milk, and soon a bartering system was organized. One night I was on guard duty when a Japanese came to me in great distress and handed me a note that a friend had written for him. It read:

> Please see and read.
>
> I marriaged last night with your friend to change a chicken into cigarettes.
>
> Then I brout four a'clock to your back gate.
>
> Suddenly your four soldiers came to me (one soldier may be American's Kenpei) and taked away into your camp.
>
> That chicken change with one hundred yen and twenty cases of cigarettes (one case into twenty peices of cigarettes)
>
> I want money and cigarrettes please give me money and cigar.
>
> The soldier what I marriaged with me is young, I forget his number and name.

From all this we deduced that he had come to barter his chicken for cigarettes and had fallen among thieves. We restored his faith in the new order by a lavish gift of food and cigarettes, and held it a small price to pay for such a letter.

A radio report was said to have stated that General MacArthur had demanded Yamashita's sword, and a few of the boys recalled that a Japanese officer lived only a short distance from the camp. Seeking a souvenir, they went to his house and demanded his sword. To their surprise, it was handed over without a protest and from that incident sprang *Operation Sword.* Our method was delightfully simple. When a Japanese officer or N.C.O. was seen with a sword, it was demanded on the pretext of "confiscating military weapons." If the owner protested, he was handed an impressive-looking receipt, usually signed "Ned Kelly," "Bob Menzies," or "Phar Lap."

The open-hearted, generous Americans continued to rain supplies on us, and the camp became an oasis of millionaire gourmets in a land of poverty and destitution. A friend came to me and said, "You smoke, don't you, Ken?" and when I nodded

he handed me a haversack of almost two hundred packs of Camels, Lucky Strikes, Philip Morris, Chesterfield, Old Gold, Twenty Grand, Sir Walter Raleigh, and other brands. So now when I asked a Japanese the time I would casually throw a packet of American cigarettes as a reward. The almost tearful "arigatos" would be royally waved away, and those who bowed particularly low were often granted the imperial patronage of an extra packet.

Sword-collecting was a fascinating game and I gradually evolved procedure that was a hundred per cent successful. My most useful instrument was an impressive printed form that had been dropped by the Americans, and which, among other things, dealt eloquently with the subject of V.D. If a Japanese protested and refused to surrender his sword—as most did—it was never possible to solve the matter by force, as *Operation Sword* relied for its effectiveness completely on bluff. In these cases I would produce a pencil and my imposing form and say something like, "Okay. You may keep your sword. But you must sign this form *stating* that you refused to hand over a military weapon. Then, when MacArthur comes, you will have to attend a court and explain."

If you kept pushing the form at them, talked long enough, and mentioned the magic name of MacArthur often enough, victory was certain.

With souvenir-happy P.O.W.s thronging the area around the camp, swords were soon in short supply, particularly as the locals grew wise to us, and wrapped them up or carried them hidden in lengths of bamboo. So we started conducting searches of trains as they stopped at Nakarma, and it was in this way that I obtained my seventeenth sword—the most outstanding of them all.

I stepped into the guard's van to see two old men sitting on a bag of rice—one with a most beautiful sword held between his legs. When I demanded it, the old man clutched it to him fiercely and with such a wild glare that I almost desisted. However, it was never wise to reveal that we were merely souvenir hunters and I put my hand in my pocket to get my pencil and V.D. form to go through the "military weapon" routine.

But before I could get out the paper, the old man's companion said something to him in obvious alarm, grabbed the sword from him, and literally thrust it at me. Later, after the train had gone, I

realized that they had believed me to be reaching for a gun in my pocket. More than ten years afterwards—still haunted by the stricken look on the old man's face—I sent the sword back to Japan.

Sergeant Clarrie Harvey of the 2/19th was small, blond, and blue-eyed, but the baby face concealed a truly vital spirit. Clarrie came to me one night and said, "Listen, Ken, this going through trains at Nakarma for swords is small time. How about a few of us go to Moji and pull up the Tokyo express?"

It was madness, of course, but Clarrie had a rare gift of leadership and I agreed, taking only the precaution of having the camp interpreter supply us with armbands stating that we were "Military Police," a race for whom the Japanese have considerable respect.

Next evening, complete with armbands, ten of us descended on the station master at Moji and ordered him to hold the express until we had confiscated all weapons. Trembling with anxiety to please the "military police," our little friend bowed over and over, and sure enough, when the long train pulled in, it was held while the brigands went through it carriage by carriage.

Only once did my spirit fail me. I started to walk into a carriage and found myself facing some fifty or sixty Japanese soldiers, probably being returned home for demobilization. There were swords here aplenty but, as I stared at the sea of faces—hard and angry under the dim electric light—and heard the rumble of hostility that came from them, my heart quailed. Enter that dimly lit, menace laden carriage? —not bloody likely. I would as lief have entered a cage full of tigers. Thinking fast, I rather childishly barked "Kurra," and then quickly found a carriage of nice safe civilians.

When all were assembled safely, Clarrie graciously indicated to the station master that the trainload of curious, craning Japanese might continue to Tokyo. He bowed and said "arigato" over and over, and the lamp in his hand trembled, so great was his respect for our rank.

We returned to camp flushed with elation. I now had twenty-three swords, having given away several that were not up to my princely standard.

Life suddenly became absurdly uncomplicated. We lived like

oriental despots, and in many ways I wished that it could go on forever. When travelling was necessary, we went to the nearest train and took the best seats. Even if there were no vacant seats, we had no problems, for the Japanese would instantly push their own people off to make room for us. Often a zealous station master would insist on clearing out an entire crowded carriage so that we might ride in comfort. Sometimes we rode in the guard's van—not to hide from hostility, for there was none; but to escape the overwhelming curiosity that followed our every move. When we were hungry, we walked into the nearest restaurant, sat down, and asked for food. There was never a question of payment, and we were showered with service. Money became completely superfluous, although, if we ate at a private house, cigarettes and chocolates were always left as payment.

The complete lack of any sign of resentment or hostility on the part of the Japanese was almost unbelievable, even to us who knew so well their unpredictable qualities. Later we discovered that MacArthur was broadcasting almost daily at this stage, warning the Japanese people not to harm the prisoners of war. What was far more effective and covered us with an invisible umbrella of safety, was that the Emperor had also spoken to his people, asking them to guard our welfare.

Cliff Moss came from the country, and, for all his large frame and strong build, he was a quiet, reserved boy. Cliff badly wanted a good sword, but was lacking in the effrontery required of a good operator. Painstakingly, we coached him in the technique of bluff and off he went, determined to obtain a souvenir sword to hang over his mantelpiece one day. He soon came across an officer, and, putting on an air of authority, politely requested his sword. The officer smiled and nodded, and indicated that Cliff should follow him. Thinking that the intention was to find a deserted place in which to hand over the sword so that there should be no loss of face, Cliff followed him, but began to feel uneasy as they came to the outskirts of the town and the houses began to thin out.

Then he halted, and again indicated that he wanted the sword. Again the Japanese officer smiled and nodded and persuaded Cliff to go just a little further, until in front of them loomed a huge military barracks, complete with artillery guns and trucks. The

officer waved his hand expansively, and suddenly the awful truth dawned on Cliff that the Japanese was in charge of these huge barracks and was happily surrendering the whole establishment to VX35131 Gunner Moss.

A sunny afternoon in early September found Dene, Puteh, Khaw Kok Teen, and me at Shimonoseki. We wandered down to the waterfront and fell into conversation with a group of Koreans who had been discharged from the Japanese Army and were returning to Korea that night. Pointing to a weatherbeaten ketch lying at anchor, one of them said, “There is our boat. Why don’t you come too?”

The thought was entrancing. We had read in the papers dropped on the camp, of the magnificent fight made by the Russians, and, filled with admiration for their deeds, I formed the mad idea of sailing to Korea and walking westward ho until we joined hands with the Russians. It was a magnificent plan except for one or two trifling details and these were crazy days, so I said, “Sure. Why not?” AndKhaw Kok Teen of the round merry face and the dancing eyes, said instantly, “Sui-la, let’s go.”

But grave, serious Dene—a complete contrast to brother Puteh who laughed and joked as carefree as a bird—said slowly, “No, I don’t like it. They’ll toss us overboard as soon as we hit the Straits of Korea.”

And even Puteh agreed, “Yeah, that’s right, boy. I don’t trust those bastard Koreans one bit.” Then, seeing my disappointment, he added, “Tell you what. Let’s go and see where they dropped that bomb we read about. Hiroshima, wasn’t it ?”

So Hiroshima it was. We left Nakarma at the end of the first week of September, curious to see the city that had so completely captured the interest of the world. Dene had to beg off the trip with stomach trouble and, to introduce some sanity and responsibility into the party, we invited Alan Foo of the 2/19th to join us.

We made an odd quartet, to say the least. Chinese Khaw Kok Teen was small with dancing black eyes, while the gay, light-hearted Puteh was of slim, medium height and fondly believed himself to be the greatest Malay “lady killer” of all time. Alan Foo was an Australian with Chinese blood on his father’s side, and I, shaven-haired and gaunt, was a very strange example of the

master race who had won the war. We wore American Army clothing of good material, but of a size that hung around our bony shoulders and was bunched around our waists.

Alan Foo was a fine person and a welcome addition to the party for his quiet common sense, for Puteh, Kok Teen, and I had one thing in common—if any one of us said a serious word, it was a complete accident.

We climbed aboard a crowded train carrying nothing except what we stood in, serenely confident that the good Lord and our friends the Japanese, would supply our every need. Later we discovered that we had less than seven yen between us. We were the meek who had suddenly inherited the earth and our "Military Police" armband was the armour that would protect us and the magic talisman that would open all doors.

Our journey was leisurely and we changed trains often, dropping off at any place that took our fancy. We came to Yawata and shuddered at the extent of the desolation, and our memories of the huge silver B29's caught in the searchlights with the flak bursting around them like a carnival of stars, took on a new meaning. Even the smaller towns had suffered incredible damage and the Japanese said—without any apparent resentment—that the "fire sticks" (light incendiary bombs) which had set the flimsy houses blazing, had created far more damage than the big block buster bombs.

With a sense of excitement we entered the underwater railway tunnel that linked the island of Kyushu to the main island of Honchu, and soon we were delighting in the vistas of mountain and sea as we travelled up the south coast of Honshu. I would rather have travelled in the guard's van, but Puteh—the gay, charming Puteh of the warm brown eyes—always insisted on our riding with the Japanese and would soon be practising his Japanese on some blushing girl.

Only once was the gay lover thrown out of stride. Puteh had been talking for some time with a shy young girl, and just before the train got to Bofu he looked up and spoke. "Hey, fellas, guess what? She lives at Bofu. Let's get off there, hey. Ah, come on, what do you say?"

We had no need to say anything, for at that moment the train

pulled into Bofu station and the stern Japanese who had been sitting beside the girl in silence, rose to go, and said in faultless English, "May I introduce myself, please? I am young lady's father."

The curiosity that we excited could not have been greater had we been visitors from another planet. At every stop, dozens of people gathered to stare into our carriage windows. Large crowds formed and followed close behind us each time we left the train. Young men climbed telegraph posts and stood on boxes to gain a better view. Curiosity, compelling interest, even awe; but never hostility.

We left the train at Otake, I think it was, and wandered into an open market square filled with Japanese buying and selling fruit and vegetables. At our entrance some two hundred Japanese stopped talking and stood motionless, so that a complete silence fell on the market place.

We stopped to talk and two hundred pairs of eyes fixed themselves on us as if held there by magnets. I felt hot breath on my cheek and turned, to find myself bumping noses with an elderly man gaping open mouthed at me from a distance of six inches. And still the strange silence and the frozen tableau held, until I casually waved a hand in the air as we talked and then there was a great gasp, and every head went up in alarm. For we were now close to the land of Hiroshima, and to these people we were not military police, not occupation forces, but men of the *bomb.*

Rather than enter Hiroshima in darkness, we left our train early that evening at the station opposite the island of Isukushima. Our plan was to cross to the island, but we had not reckoned with the station master, who was under the firm impression that MacArthur would personally behead him if every courtesy were not extended to the four rather unusual "military police."

Our little friend virtually dragged us into the waiting room, and within minutes had an army of helpers setting up tables and forms and cooking a hot meal. Then as we ate our steaming rice and fried meat, he barked out a stream of instructions, and women scurried busily to lay out warm and inviting beds for us.

"More *sake?* Bath? You want girl?" asked the station master anxiously, and Puteh's eyes lit up.

But Alan Foo said firmly, “No, we’re tired.”

And so to bed we went, pleasantly tired, and feeling perfectly secure in the midst of millions of our former enemies.

Morning dawned crisp and sunny. We joined a carriageful of wide-eyed Japanese on the first through train and by ten o’clock we were drawing near to Hiroshima … desolate Hiroshima,with its leaning houses and brooding silence.

At the centre of the city we stopped and looked about us, still unable to believe that one bomb had been responsible for this holocaust. But it was not difficult, standing on this hot road in the heart of the dead city, to imagine the great flash that had first dazzled and then incinerated the shocked people of Hiroshima. Nor was it hard to imagine the immense wave of searing air that had followed and blasted down buildings and houses like matchsticks, and that had overturned thousands and thousands of hibachis (charcoal burners), so that all over Hiroshima there sprang countless pinpoints of flame that grew with nightmare speed into the roaring furnace that engulfed the living and the dead.

And, as we stood almost ankle deep in ashes, it was not hard to imagine how those who survived the blast must have run screaming up and down this now silent street. Some would have been carrying their crying, clutching children; others half supporting, half tugging, the shocked older people; all frantically seeking to escape from the blistering, searing heat that had turned their peaceful homes into places of horror, and their familiar streets into crematoriums in which perished possessions, hopes, and, in the end, fear.…

And easy, painfully easy, to visualize the fate that had overtaken them as the countless fires joined hands with glee and danced high in the air, almost as if seeking to touch the evil mushroom cloud above.

But that was imagination.

The reality was the girl with scarred features who passed with averted face. And the listless people who went by so dully; the scarred people; the burnt people; the apathetic people. And the people who even now showed not the slightest sign of hostility or resentment.

Saddened and depressed beyond words at the magnitude of the tragedy, and feeling like ghouls, we decided to leave Hiroshima that same day. There was little to keep us here; nothing to see; no place to rest; nothing to eat; nothing to drink.

Fortunately for our peace of mind we knew nothing of such atomic age refinements as radiation sickness, and although we occasionally picked up a statue or kicked over a strangely fused piece of metal for a closer look, we were never tempted to take a souvenir. One does not rob a tomb….

"Im hungry. Think I'll ask the Kenpei (police) if there's another P.O.W. camp around here," Puteh said, and we walked past a pedestal-type wash basin freakishly left standing in the middle of nothing, to where a squat, shabbily uniformed policeman stood sweating in the sun.

There was an exchange of bows and after a time Puteh returned and for the first time we saw a smiling face in Hiroshima.

"He said there is no camp in the area that he knows of and that we are the first strangers here since the "joto nei" (bad) day. He wanted to know if I am the Utmost Commander of the American Army," Puteh told us.

"Whee," whistled Kok Teen, visibly impressed.

The irrepressible Puteh grinned and added, "Somehow it seemed better not to tell him we are just poor bloody prisoners looking for a feed."

But Alan Foo smiled his surprisingly gentle smile and said seriously, "In any case, let's get out of here. First here or not, I must admit I'm sorry we ever came. To be honest I don't fancy being here at night—the place gives me the creeps." Then he looked back at the city and said almost to himself, "Poor, poor, bastards," and I thought how strange it was that he should use almost the same words as those uttered by Harry Brown over the natives' mass grave in the hills of Hintok.

During the last months of the war there had been a small part of our being that, despite our own danger, had felt an odd pity for this strange race.

Now, as we left Hiroshima, our hatred of the Japanese was swept away by the enormity of what we had seen.

All bitterness was shed and left behind forever in the silence,

the desolation, the ashes of Hiroshima.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SAFELY BACK AT Nakarma, we found that the occupation forces had still not landed, and that life at Camp 21 was crazier than ever. Some men had servants; others had acquired cars and trucks for their personal use; a brewery had been discovered not far from Nakarma and beer was commandeered by the truckload; the medical officers handed out tablets by the score and were concerned at the threat of V.D.

We visited other P.O.W. camps. All, without exception, were strictly controlled by officers who were taking strong measures to prevent the wholesale junketing around Japan in which we were indulging. At most camps our men were armed and guarding other men who were quite certain that the angry civilians would kill them if they ventured outside the camp. We were fortunate that our camp had no British or Australian officers to curb our wanderings.

Con Chandler, Peter Dawson, Col Butterworth, Jesse Clark, and Jack Cross, all very much the worse for Japanese beer, decided that they had always wanted to rob a bank and that there was no time like the present. Brandishing swords, they descended on the Nakarma bank and used the swords to hack a path through the plate glass doors. Minutes later, bleeding but triumphant, they emerged with bag after bag of the light Japanese coins which they commenced to throw in handfuls to the overjoyed civilians.

"Jush a minute," said Con Chandler gravely. "Don't lesh make it too easy for the bastarsh." So, in a most delicate blend of charity and sadism, they threw the coins into the stinking canal which the Japanese used as both a sewer and a toilet, and smiled benevolently at the sight of their former enemies diving eagerly into the mire.

At this stage I was still hopeful of getting hold of the photo the Japanese had taken of me at Nagasaki, for I knew that no one would believe how I looked unless they had this proof. So I spoke with my R.A.F. friends. "How about going to see our old camp at Nagasaki? It's only a few hundred miles." They jumped at the idea and Khaw Kok Teen said instantly, "Sui-la, what are we waiting for." Puteh grinned as he replied, "Tell you what. There's

a few of those dockyard girls will be pleased to see old Puteh again." And Mahomet Moyadene Merican smiled his grave smile and told us, "Best I come too, and keep an eye on this foolish brother."

We left Nakarma next day and headed south. Once again our journey was a leisurely one. I had just calculated that we must be getting near our destination when, for no apparent reason, the train stopped at a bare platform in a wilderness of debris and I realized that the tracks must have been too damaged to allow us to go right into the city.

We got out of the train, and looked about us. Curious, I asked a Japanese where we were. Though I live to be a hundred, I shall never forget the tightening of my heart when he answered simply, "Nagasaki."

No! It couldn't be! I had stood on the Nagasaki station for hours and remembered it well. If this was Nagasaki, where were the station walls with their gaudy advertisements? Where were the colourful rows of shops opposite? And the bright trams that ran alongside. And where were the busy, industrious people?

Then we picked out the street running parallel to the platform, and at intervals through the ashes we noticed the glint of tram lines. Yes, it was Nagasaki all right, but a Nagasaki that was now as featureless as a desert and as heart-wrenching as a blind baby.

Because I had known the city and found it attractive, the tragedy was a more personal one than Hiroshima and in some ways a more shocking one, for the mind's eye could contrast the picturesque past with the tragic reality of the present.

Heavy-hearted, we walked towards the waterfront, but our spirits rose a little to discover that this city had actually been less unfortunate than Hiroshima. For Nagasaki is built around a hill, and although one half of the city had been blasted and seared into oblivion, the friendly hill had imposed its vast bulk to shelter and protect those who lived between it and the sea. Indeed, as we sailed across the bay in our ferry, and looked back, Nagasaki seemed as beautiful and untouched as ever. I remembered the people I'd known there, especially the old men with the wooden clappers who had walked the streets at night chanting, "Hi no yo-jin, hi no yo-jin ... be careful of fire, be careful of fire.…"

It was pure luck that we got into the camp at all, for when we

hopped off the ferry we found our old friends scouring the island for supplies dropped the day before. Talking animatedly to them we passed into the camp easily enough, but within minutes two grim-faced men wearing MP armbands (the genuine article) had hauled us before six stern officers, who gave us five minutes to leave the camp. They wanted no foot-loose wanderers in this camp, for they were mortally afraid of radiation sickness and of precipitating trouble with the "angry" Japanese who still controlled the island.

"Fair enough, it's your camp," I conceded, "but if you won't feed us, at least give me the photo. After all, I've come over two hundred miles for it."

"No, Sergeant. These photos are part of camp records and have to be handed over to the Japanese as we leave."

This was the last straw, and I said angrily, "Haven't you chaps heard? The war is over and *we* won it—not the Japanese."

But this was the last straw for the officers, too, and seconds later we were pushed out of Fukuoka 2 and the doors slammed with tremendous finality behind us.

"Bloody bastards," Puteh burst out, pugnacious for once. "I'm hungry. Better those bastards don't come to Malaya after the war, or I show them a thing or two." And Dene, taking in his brother's five foot five inches and slight frame, rolled his eyes to the heavens and muttered to himself in Malay.

There were still a few men looking for parachutes and supplies, and I stopped one man and asked if he had any news of our dockyard hanchos. He rattled off a few names and then added, "We haven't seen Ginty, but old Pop came to the camp gates looking for food last week."

"Did you fix him up okay?" I asked.

"Not on your bloody life," he grinned. "We gave the old bastard a boot up the arse and sent him away faster than he came."

I felt like shouting, "What sort of a pack of heartless bastards are you in this camp?" but then I remembered that this man's best friend had been beaten to death in Thailand, and that none of the men here had seen what had been done to Japan. None of them had seen Hiroshima or Nagasaki.…

But for nearly twenty years I have been haunted by the thought

of a fine old man coming to the gates of the camp, seeking Christian charity from his fellow Christians, and being booted away by those who now possessed so much.

We returned to Nakarma just in time to greet the first of the occupation troops. Big, smartly uniformed Americans, armed to the teeth, they came warily into Nakarma with tommy-guns pointed menacingly at the nervous civilians. But although Khaw Kok Teen said, "Better we tell them that all they have to worry about here is V.D.," no one laughed. For these were our strong and sturdy brothers who had fought their way to us, while we hewed coal and built ships for the enemy. They were horrified at our condition and appearance.

"Just point out some of the goddam sons of bitches, buddy, and we'll fix them for you," they said fiercely, and were astonished when we replied quickly, "Good Lord, no." For the amazing thing was that, with scarcely an exception, nobody wanted any form of revenge or retribution. We who had spent three and a half years planning a bloody revenge were as surprised at our attitude as the Americans. It was mainly pity, I suppose: we were going back to so much … leaving them to so little. There had always been something slightly pathetic about the Japanese pretensions, even in their moments of victory, but now that we saw what lay ahead for them in Japan, further revenge seemed cruel and pointless.

With the occupation forces came an Australian wearing officer's pips, who addressed us, "Lads, there is a big purge on souvenirs, and if you make a welter of it, they will be banned completely. Think of your mates, lads; bring *one* souvenir and you won't spoil it for everybody." Because he spoke so earnestly and so sincerely, I gave away twenty-two swords, keeping only the magnificent one that I had taken from the old man in the guard's van.

But when on 20 September 1945 we boarded an American liberty ship in Nagasaki harbour other erstwhile captives, not as stupid as I was, came on board laden like packhorses with all kinds of souvenirs. One man trundled a wheelbarrow up the gang plank—a barrow laden with swords and typewriters. We found the sailors souvenir happy, for this was a supply ship that had sailed around the back ports of the world for two and a half years

without any excitement or contact with the enemy. Now at last they had come to the already legendary Nagasaki … and were not allowed off for fear of radiation sickness!

Sailors fought to pay a hundred dollars for a sword, men received fifty dollars for a broken-down watch with Japanese characters on the face, and one man was given sixty dollars for a roughly made sign which said in Japanese characters "Benjo."

Time and again I was offered up to a hundred and fifty dollars for my one sword, and from start to finish nobody cared what the P.O.W.s brought home. The only limit was what you were capable of carrying. I hated that stupid, bone-headed officer with a venom I could never muster up for the Japanese.

We sailed to Okinawa, then left for Manila in Liberators worn out from bombing raids. There were no seats, so that we all sprawled in the bomb bays. It was cold and draughty, but no one cared.

Not far from the Philippines, we saw several planes circling the sea far below us. "Tough tit," said our tall pilot, when we landed at Clarke Field. "The goddam pilot pulled the wrong goddam lever and a bunch of Dutchies went through the bomb bays into the sea."

At Clarke Field we transferred to the smaller C47s and flew into Manila. It was kindness, kindness, all the way—ice-cream, Coca-Cola, white women, pay books, and injections. And—*the diabolical revenge of Peter Dawson. …*

There were many Japanese P.O.W.s working under American supervision in Manila and Peter asked a Sergeant if he could "borrow" ten men. The Yank enthusiastically agreed and said, "Do the sons of bitches over properly, bud."

Peter made the ten thoroughly apprehensive Japanese squat in a circle and then gave each man a bowl of rice. "That's right," he said kindly to the surprised men. "Eat up," and ten heads bowed and ten men smiled their thanks and relief. And when their bowls were empty, Peter filled them up, and again, and again, always insisting kindly that they continue to eat. After a while, to encourage any of the now sickly-faced Japanese, he ran around the circle, swiftly booting any man who was not eating.

Then a few of his mates arrived and watched with interest, and —in a variation of the old lions and Christians joke—they would

shout, “Look Peter, there’s one not eating over there.”

Manila was an exciting place in 1945 and the city had many fine features but my outstanding memory of it is of ten ghastly-hued Japanese chewing and chewing while Peter Dawson ran from one to the other, booting them firmly on the backside the moment they stopped eating.

We sailed from Manila on the British aircraft carrier, *Speaker,* and in between sunbaking on the flight deck and listening to Bing Crosby sing “Danny Boy” over the speaker system, we debated endlessly how we would be received in Australia. We recalled with some misgiving the secret radios of Changi, and the news they had brought of the harsh and bitter reception given to General Gordon Bennett in 1942. His only crime had been his escape; our far graver sin was that we had actually directly helped the enemy for three and a half years.

Sydney Harbour was reached on 15 October, and all doubts and fears of how the ignoble P.O.W.s would be received were swept away by the tumultuous, emotional welcome that was ours. The *Speaker* passed through the Heads at 9 a.m. and began a slow, triumphant passage down the harbour. Warships hooted and tooted as we passed and sailors lined the decks and cheered. A friendly, crazy flotilla of small craft circled around us like so many happy puppies and they bore such messages as *“All our love to Bert Brown 2/29th”* and *“Welcome Dear Aussies”* (That was one we loved.) Kindness, kindness, kindness.

Wharf labourers cheered themselves hoarse as we pulled into the wharf and the tugs tooted and hooted in a frenzy of welcome. It was more—far more—than we had ever dreamt of, and we felt almost like heroes and not men returning after three and a half years of aiding the enemy.

Then came a triumphant procession through Sydney in buses and the amazing welcome, the cheers, the kisses, and the affection showered upon us was too much. Our sight became strangely blurred and we had a peculiar difficulty in passing even the simplest of remarks to each other. Yes, our Australian people shed their natural reserve that day in an outpouring of sympathy and affection for their tattered warriors, and I think that its like might never come again.

The Victorians left Sydney by train for Melbourne, and as we

drew near to Benalla, we prepared a boisterous welcome for our friend Pop Heaney. The Thailand and Malaya P.O.W.s had returned to Australia some weeks earlier, and, knowing Pop, we guessed that he would be waiting with a big grin on the station of his home town.

"Now listen, Smithy," said Jim Ellis. "You and Ken grab Pop and hold him and I'll pull his trousers off."

It was silly enough joke but meant only to express our joy at seeing our old friend. We waited poised and excited as the train pulled into Benalla station but to our disappointment Pop was not there.

"Probably shearing or something," I thought, and walked over to ask the ticket collector. "Heaney? Len Heaney?" he said slowly, "It's a wonder nobody told you. He died in Thailand three days before the war ended."

Journey's end came at Melbourne on 17 October 1945—more than four and a half years since the day we sailed from Port Melbourne on the TSS *Zealandia,* bound for an unknown destination. Wre jumped for joy to learn that George McCracken, Jack McGlone, Dick Voege, Ken Daniel, Bill Peck, and many other old friends had survived, and sorrowed to learn that the stout-hearted Alan Porter had died the day after the war ended.

. . .

We settled down to civilian life once more and laughed when Jim Ellis could never find his ball at golf. Then the speck of steel that had lodged in his eye at Nagasaki was discovered and his eye was removed to save his sight.

Years passed as years will.

I had an occasional letter from Khaw Kok Teen—letters written with such simplicity and nostalgia that I felt sad for days. In one. he wrote. "We left Manila about two weeks after you have gone home, and during that time I felt very sad and lonely. Every time and everywhere I went I thought of you and the grand time we used to have when we were together."

From Puteh there also came cards and letters and one began—very typically "Whacko, I've been promoted and now I'm allowed

four wives!"

Little wonder that my heart will always have a place on it marked "Puteh" and "Khaw Kok Teen."

In the early 1950s the "Emergency" came to Malaya, and European planters and British soldiers were being attacked and killed by Chinese Communists operating from secret jungle camps. I felt sure that the Communist jungle camp near Chaah would be being used as a base by the Chinese Communists and I was almost on the point of sending a map and directions to the British authorities in Malaya.

Then I remembered the old Chinese who had said, "We are your friends, the Chinese Communists. Already we have saved two hundred of your friends and we will guide you to Kluang also, if you desire." I thought of the slim, smiling young men we had known in the camp and the risks they had taken for us. I remembered the young man who gave me the priceless pair of rubber shoes despite my protests that he had no rubber shoes himself.

"Tid'apa," he had smiled. "Tomorrow I shoot myself a Jap and then I have a pair with two toes."

The more I thought, the more it seemed to me that Christ Himself must have been proud of His Communist children in those days. And what had I and my friends done for the Chinese? I recalled with guilt the stranger whom we had slaughtered and buried in the pig trap at the guerrilla camp.

I thought, too, of how "military requirements" had caused us to burn down the Chinese village of Jemaluang in January 1942. We had watched dozens of Chinese families trudge past our gun pit carrying all that they possessed and with the black smoke of their homes hanging ominously above them. Little children clutched toys as they were dragged along the hot road and many of the women were crying.

After our complete collapse some six weeks later many of those who had been our friends must have had bitter thoughts about the destruction of their homes, particularly as Jemaluang was neither attacked nor defended, nor was a shot ever fired in anger in the vicinity.

So it was that—rightly or wrongly, I am still not certain—I took

no action.

In I960, Father Tony Glynn, a Catholic missionary priest of Nara, came to Australia on a goodwill mission, and, still haunted by an old man's stricken face, I gave him my sword to take back to Japan. The Japanese characters in the haft of the blade told us that the sword belonged to the house of Fujiwara, and gave the Prefecture and the name of the Buddhist priest who had originally made the sword. (Only priests are allowed to forge the finest blades, for the Japanese believe that only a flawless man can make a flawless blade.)

With this information as a guide I felt very hopeful that the owner, or his heirs, could be traced, but it was not to be. Even more disappointing was the fact that the Japanese would not allow its return to Australia and now it lies in the Yasukuni Jinja —the biggest shrine to the war dead in Japan.

Another strange echo of the war came soon after when John Balsillie returned from Malaya laden with souvenirs of Gemas, Bakri, and other old battlefields.

John was a Warrant Officer in the permanent Australian Army, and while serving in Malaya, he had taken out squads of men to the various battlefields of 1942. Aided by the ability of their mine detectors to indicate the presence of metal underground, John and his men dug holes all over Malaya and uncovered bayonets, rifles, fused pieces of Japanese tanks, helmets, etc. Most of the relics are now on permanent display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra but my own highly-prized gift from John is the rusted case of a two-pound shell that we had fired at Gemas some eighteen years before.

But on the whole, the war was forgotten except for these odd echoes, and life became very pleasant. And the more pleasant it was, the more conscious I became of what the dead had sacrificed.

Then in I960 I was able to write in a Company magazine, "To this writer and his wife, a small seven-pound, squealing … squeaking, crying, cross patch, irate, dominant, yelling, bellowing, hiccuping, miniature male—Guy Anthony Harrison. A brother for Beau, the Labrador, and for Robin and Poo Noi, the

budgerigars. Je suis enchante!"

And with the birth of my son came an even sharper consciousness of the debt owed to these men and the words of Rupert Brooke took on a new deeper meaning,

"These laid the world away; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality."

After a lapse of a few years, I attended an Anzac Day march, and, looking at my old companions, I realized with some surprise that we were all growing old. There were some like Jock Taylor still crippled from their wounds, and others like Ken Daniel who would never again know perfect health.

As the years passed a rather surprising thing happened. I found that I had developed a marked admiration for the Japanese and that, try as I might, I could find no hatred whatever for them. Instead I remembered more and more their basic virtues of loyalty, cleanliness, and courage, and the more I read, the more I became convinced that they were soldiers of tremendous bravery.

I read of Tarawa, where four thousand five hundred Japanese resisted the invasion and only nineteen did not die. Of the nineteen who did not die, most were too badly wounded to resist and the others were captured because they were buried under their own dead. I read of Burma, where after two and a half years of fighting exactly seven Japanese prisoners had been taken. They also, were too badly wounded to resist.

"Ah yes," said my friends, "but that was not bravery—they were just fanatical." I could not agree with this opinion for one moment. The Japanese soldiers were men of flesh and blood—human beings with very human emotions of fear and foreboding. I have seen Japanese afraid on many an occasion, and often we laughed scornfully at their somewhat childish and unreasoning fear of wild animals. But of one thing I had no doubt—a Japanese in a position where he was fighting for his country and his Emperor and he would fight till he died.

No, it seems to me that it is far too convenient to say that *we* are brave, but that the enemy is merely fanatical. I fancy that I

was given the privilege of fighting against possibly the bravest soldiers of all time. One thing I know for certain—if there is ever another war and if I have to fight again, I would like my fellow Australians around me, and a Japanese battalion on my left and a Japanese battalion on my right. Then perhaps, even I might stand firm and give some cheek.

On quite a few occasions my attitude towards the Japanese led to strained relationships with those who had lost relatives and friends in the South-East Pacific. A friend said one day, "But even if you don't hate the Japanese, surely you must regret that you were ever a prisoner?"

"Not at all," I answered quite truthfully. "It was an experience that money could not buy, and now that it's all over I wouldn't have missed it for quids." He frowned and asked sharply, "And do you think the dead feel that way?"

With a shock, I suddenly thought, "I'm letting down the living and the dead. I have a story to tell of these men when they were all young and vital; a story of their studiness of spirit, their humour and integrity—and their mateship."

This then, is the story I have tried to tell—of the dead who died so hard and so young and who missed so much of life; of the living who fought and suffered but were always stout of heart. And of an enemy who fought bravely. An enemy who was so often an appalling winner, but who did at least prove to be the best of losers.

I have written of the men who died for they deserve this small gift of our remembrance, and I could wish for the pen of Shakespeare to depict them in their youth and strength. A Shakespeare so arrogant and certain of his God-given gift to confer immortality that he could write,

> "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

I have also written of the dead, for I think that you would have liked Toby Henry and Bill McGlone who died in action; Ken Bell who was executed; Dick Herring who died of cholera; George Smith and red-headed Paddy who lay at Konyu 3; Bob Ansett who stayed at Nagasaki; and many many others.

My story is their story. We all shared the same hopes and fears.

We starved together; we exulted together; and only in the final adventure of all did our paths turn slowly away. They are long dead now in far off lands and I wish them well. Sleep, my comrades, and soft winds bring peace.